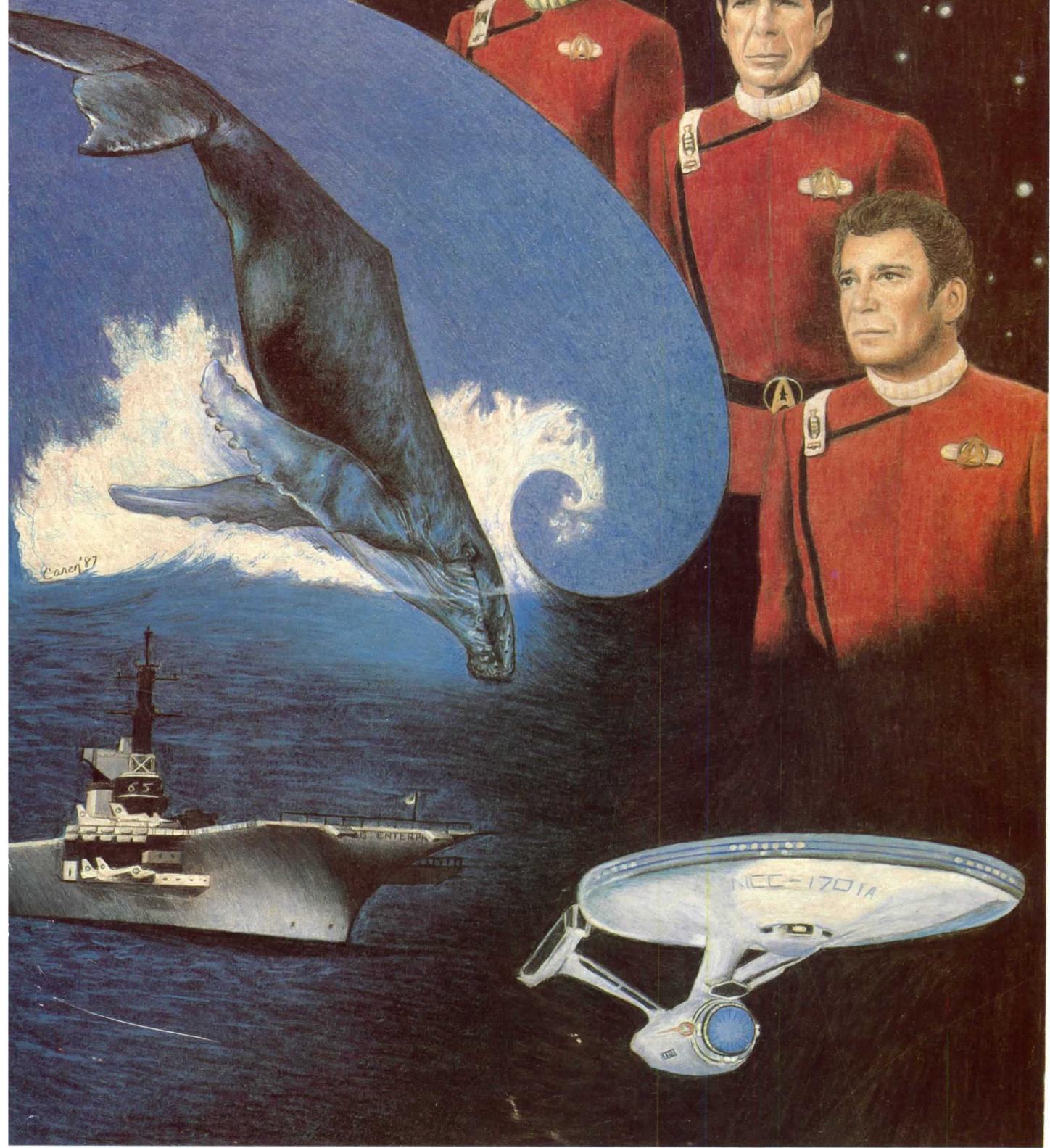


MIND MELD IV



* * * * *

*For chances taken
So that we may begin anew
We thank you.
For our rebirth
From one world to another
For our freedom
To live a life we could
Only imagine before
We thank you.
And if thanks be not enough
Then a vow:
Across the void this truth be held
Forever will our two minds meld.*

* * * * *



HB

* * *

MIND MELD IV

"The glory of creation is in its infinite diversity."

*"And in the way our differences combine
to create meaning and beauty."*

- Is There in Truth No Beauty?



In Person Price: \$10.00

First Class (US): \$12.75

Editor

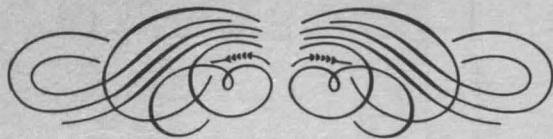


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For though we are strangers
In your silent world,
To live on the land
We must learn from the sea.

-- John Denver, "Calypso"



DEDICATION

To The Crew of the New
Starship Enterprise, NCC 1701-A
and their new beginning

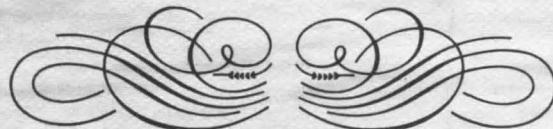
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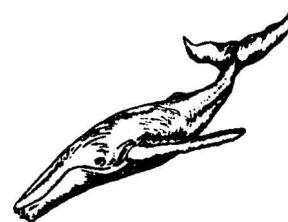
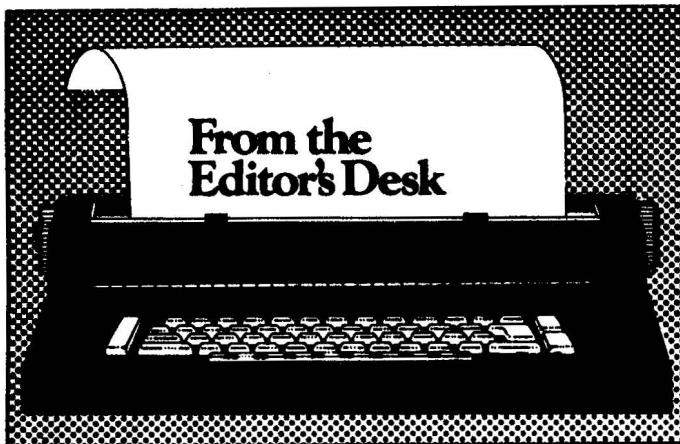
Madeline E. Zier



Though death may end a life --
it doesn't end a relationship --
one which struggles on in the
survivor's mind to find a reso-
lution that may never be found.

- Unknown





Well, as always, I'm writing this just before I go to press. But then, again, I wouldn't want to break an editor's long-time tradition, would I?

On a more serious note, I'd like to mention something about the selling of fanzines by professional dealers. As zines become more professional looking, they also become attractive to these dealers as an item to sell. It is not unusual to see a newly-published zine (less than a year old) on a professional dealer's rack with a price that is double, or even more, the price set by the editor.

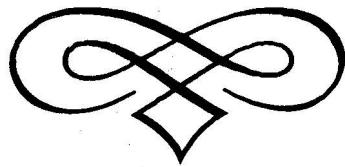
On the other hand, there are some dealers who only mark-up the prices to cover their own expenses, which is perfectly understandable. Also, these dealers (which I consider reputable), do not sell at conventions that the editor is attending; rather, they sell at conventions the editor cannot attend, thus enabling fans to purchase zines in person for a price not much more than the price by mail from the editor. This also adds the benefit of not having to risk ordering by mail.

I mention this as a caution to those of you buying at conventions. This discussion does not apply to old, rare zines -- since dealers usually have to pay top dollar as well. Beginning with this issue of Mind Meld, I will be including the price on the title page of each issue. I, personally, am tired of trying to keep the cost of my zine down, only to see the price jacked up unfairly by SOME dealers. So, buyers, BEWARE!

So much for my soapbox. Thanx for reading this far. Now, on to Mind Meld. I do hope you enjoy this issue and, as always, I welcome letters of comment. Thank you once again to my readers AND contributors -- for without any of you, there wouldn't be a zine!

Enjoy.

lily
Sandy



THANKS

Cheryl Zier -- for coming up with "poetry on demand" (not to mention a certain piece of artwork for Mind Meld III) AND your constant support!

Karen Maddox -- for just being there -- through the good AND the bad!

Caren Parnes -- once again for a beautiful cover! (and you were worried I wouldn't like it!)

AND to all my friends in general -- for support over the past several weeks -- your support has been felt and is muchly appreciated! Thanx.



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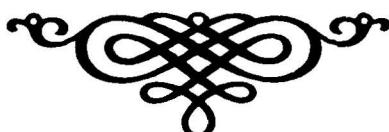
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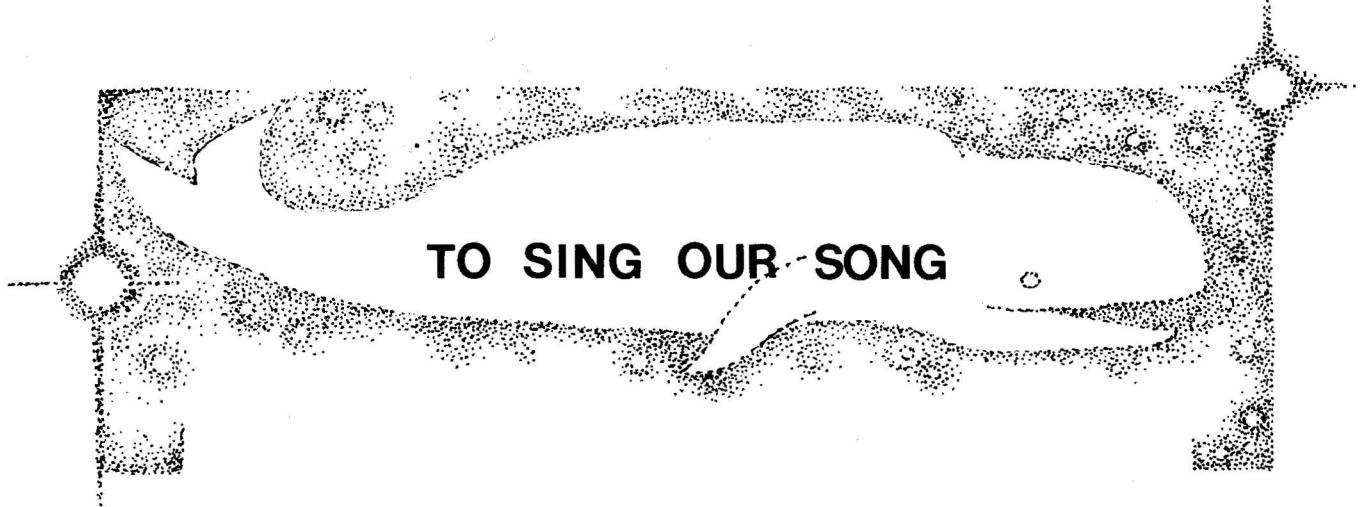
Poetry inside front cover by Cheryl Zier

Calligraphy inside front cover by Myrtle Mitchell

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Borders/graphics by Mary Mills: 78, 112, 125





TO SING OUR SONG

What kind of creatures be these?
Man-like, but not of our world.
Yet he swims among us and touches our mind
With curiosity and intelligence.

Man has never been a friend to us.
For centuries he has hunted our kind
Never realizing that we were his equal.
While land is his world, the sea is ours.

He bids us come to his world of the future
Where safety and freedom will be ours.
But can we trust our new life to that word?
Will man have learned that all life is precious
And the loss of one is a loss to all?

He asks us to come and sing our song
In a world that no longer hears our message.
To sing our answer to the great ones who search for us
In a world where we sing no more.

Many eons ago we were brought to guard
The mighty oceans of the earth.
So long as we live, the planet will survive.
We must be there to answer,
And sing the song no other knows.

So we will go in friendship Spock
To sing our ancient song once more.
Trusting that they, at last, will know
That the universe is theirs --
But the oceans are forever ours.

... by Terri Sylvester

border: Caro Hedge

omega

I held you dying in my arms, McCoy sobbing brokenly as he did his best to make you comfortable — it was all either of us could do.

I prepared to die with you.

"No," you ordered, "get them home," and I knew you meant your crew and ship.

"Tell Nogura," you commanded, "this must be stopped!" and I knew you meant the much-dreaded Romulan/Klingon Alliance.

"Help him, please," you asked, thus sealing my fate.

I nodded, touching your mind one last time.
You smiled even as your body grew leaden in my arms.

I held you closer, unable to accept that the impossible had finally happened.

Our link was still there but, like a towline into darkness, I could not see what it held nor touch the precious cargo.

And I waited — a lifetime of loneliness and aching silence as I fulfilled your last orders. Peace did not come easily. Romulan brilliance combined with Klingon treachery made an almost invincible enemy.

At last we did arrive at a troubled and cautious peace, the losses to all uncountable by even the most sophisticated computers.

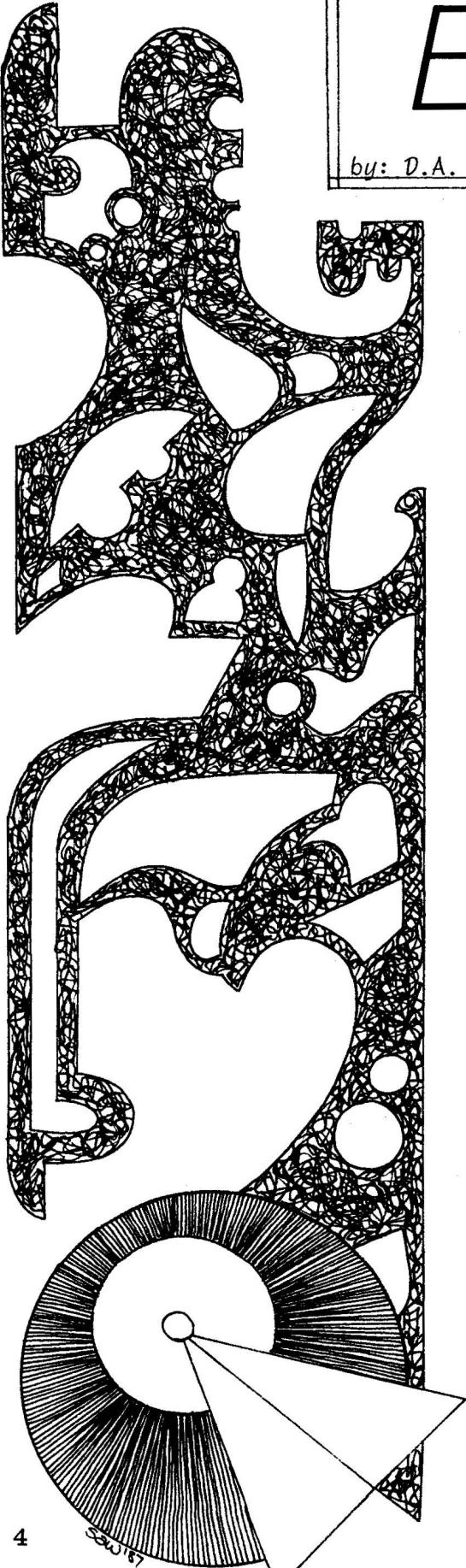
Now the waiting is over.

Has it seemed a lifetime to you? Have you waited, moment by moment? Or have you perhaps waited in the blessed womb of unawareness like the unborn child waiting for life? I wish it so for I would not have you suffer.

I gladly release my hold on this life.
The towline draws me not into the darkness
but into the sparkling sunlight of your mind.

.... alpha

by: Lynn Syck & Laurel Ridener



EXISTENCE

by: D.A. Martin

art: Shellie Whild

It occurred to me
In idle thought the other day
Just what's wrong with you.
You believe them.
The fools that say you're an impossibility
Vulcan-human hybrid?
Never.
Even should conception occur
Gestation never could.
Healthy birth, impossible.
All these years and they still say it.
And you believe those imbeciles.

Your intellect tells you
That you most certainly do exist.
That you are a fine officer,
The best Executive,
And a brilliant scientist.
Without false modesty you can admit
To being a genius.
Can accept respect
For what you have attained
What you have accomplished.
Does a non-entity attain, accomplish?

But as a man,
A living, breathing, needing, feeling, being?
Never.
You don the Vulcan mantle.
Reject, suppress emotion
In favor of cold logic.

Could I explain it to you?
Would my illogical arguments
Ever convince you that you are
At the very least
The embodiment of IDIC?
That most revered of all Vulcan concepts.

A CACOPHONY OF

SILENCE

by:

Laurel Ridener &
Lynn Syck

art:

Merle Decker

ARI457 was a nondescript little planet in a nondescript little system that had been all but forgotten once the preliminary surveys had been analyzed, catalogued and filed.

James Kirk rose from the command chair and moved to stand in front of the viewscreen, hands lightly clasped behind his back. He stared at the cloud-mottled ball of rock. "Why anybody -- much less the Klingons -- would take a sudden interest in that" -- punctuated with a nod toward the picture -- "is beyond me."

Kirk studied the planet before him. According to the early surveys, there were no mineralogical fortunes to be found beneath its rocky surface. Colonization was out of the question for humanoids because of the vicious weather cycle and the almost soil-free surface. A Horta might have found Ari delightful but the humans had not. Even the turbulent clouds were inhospitable to humanity, containing a trace element that played intermittent havoc with the delicate sensors of the **Enterprise**.

Located in the outer boundaries of the galaxy, the tiny system was not strategic to anyone and the nocturnal bird-like natives who inhabited the cliffs were at the primitive end of the cultural scale. They were winged bipeds who leaned more toward the blocky stature of humans than did their distant cousins, the Scorr. Unlike the Scorr, however, the Arian were predatorily vicious.

Had the Klingons not interfered, the natives would have been allowed to mature at their own pace, pursuing their own destiny. However, the contamination had occurred -- Klingon vessels had been sighted in the area and their implements had been recovered from abandoned campsites. The **Enterprise** had been assigned the dubious duty of ferrying a six-member sociology team from Headquarters to Ari. And, as if adding insult to injury, Kirk himself had been ordered to accompany the team and advise them. His previous experience with the Scorr and his more current experience with the Klingons had garnered him that honor; though, he had not been particularly flattered. "I still think it's crazy that they expect me to have a say in what happens to the Arian, Spock," he had grumbled. "I'm a soldier, not a sociologist."

Deep down inside, Kirk wished he could get his hands on just one Klingon so he could find out exactly what in the hell they had been doing there. Gentle laughter rippled through their link. Kirk glanced over at Spock and grinned sheepishly. None of

Look at it logically if you must:

You are infinite diversity.
One-half Human.
One-half Vulcan.
What could possibly be more diverse?
One-half,
Wanting, needing, caring, loving.
The other half,
The man you allow us to see.

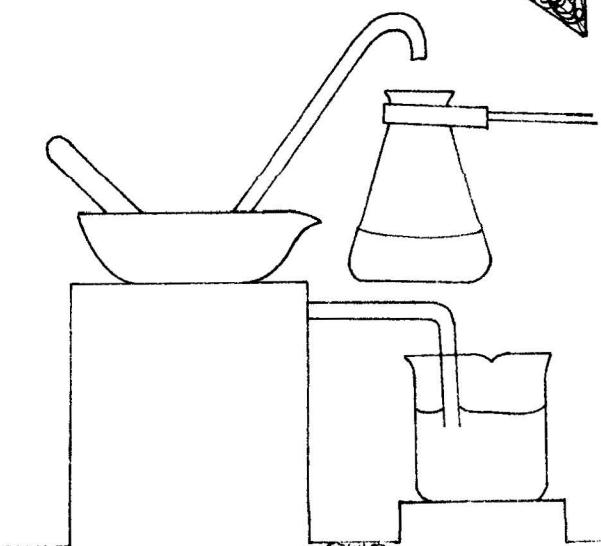
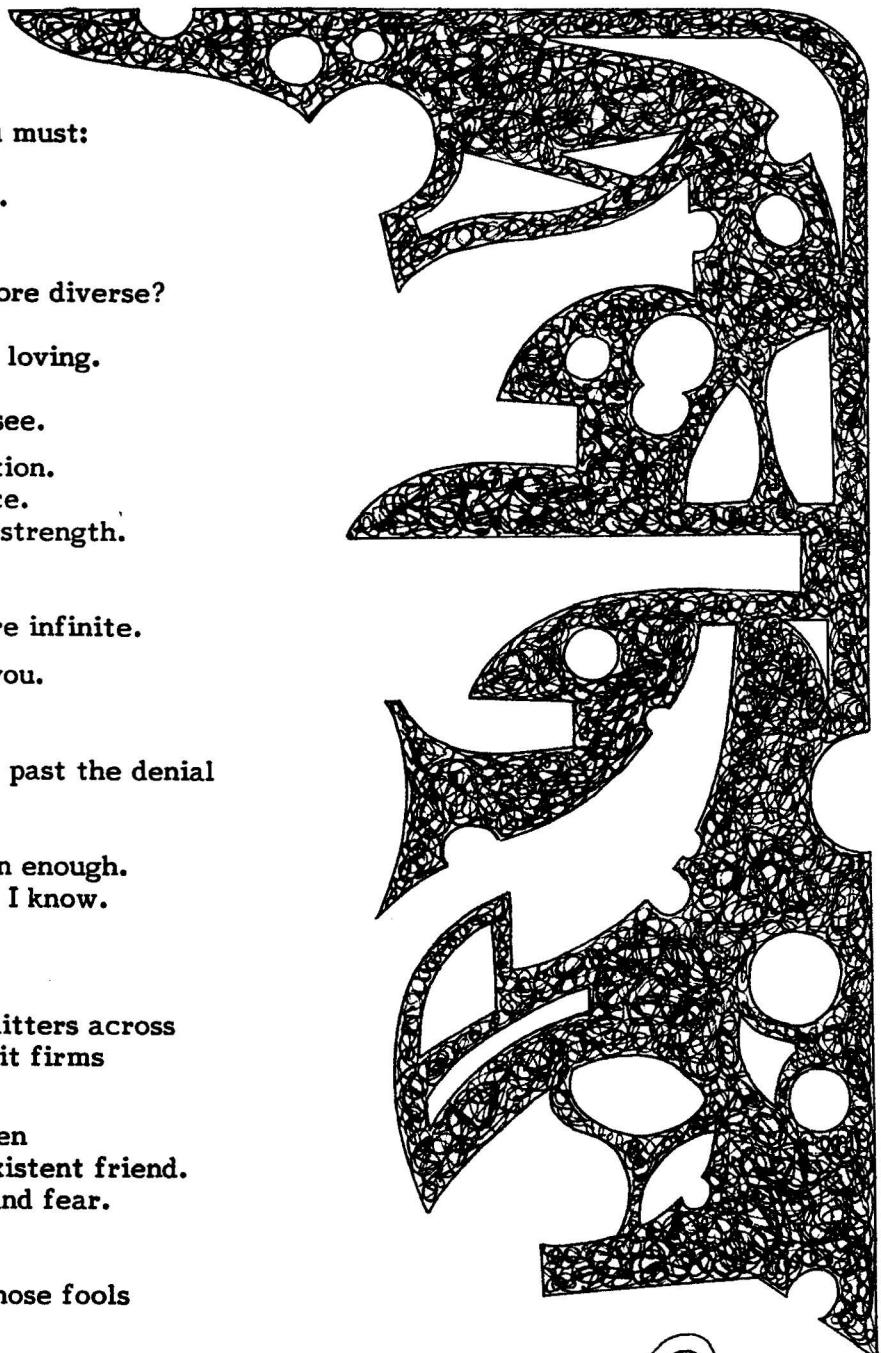
You are infinite combination.
Expressive eyes, stoic face.
Thin frame, unbelievable strength.
Scientist and soldier
Musician and diplomat.
The combinations truly are infinite.

Jim, perhaps, could find you.
If anyone can,
Why not a friend?
He, I believe, could reach past the denial
Touch and bring forth
That non-existent being.
God knows he's tried often enough.
Probably more often than I know.
I've seen him reach,
Almost succeed.
Watched you withdraw.
Disappointment, defeat flitters across
A handsome face, before it firms
Back into determination.

I've watched your eyes then
My non-emotional, non-existent friend.
Dark pools of grief, loss and fear.
You need not fear.
He'll never stop trying.
He has no more faith in those fools
Than I do.

I won't give up either.
I'll poke and prod and annoy
Like a pestering insect.
Insult me all you want,
I don't mind.
I am not going away.

For your sake, for his,
Most of all, for my own,
I'm going to prove to all the doubters,
Even you. That you,
In all your infinite diversity
In all your infinite combinations
Do exist.



the Vulcan's inner amusement at his Captain and bond-mate showed on the stern visage, but the link shimmered with his delight.

"It would indeed be interesting," was all the Vulcan said before retreating beneath his computer hood.

Leonard McCoy had entered the bridge and stopped at Uhura's station, trading shipboard gossip with the lovely communications officer. He overheard Kirk's last words and walked up to stand behind the Captain, looking over Kirk's shoulder at the screen. Something blew lightly across the back of McCoy's neck, making the tiny hairs stand on end. He shivered, trying to shrug away the chill but the feeling of impending disaster remained.

"I still don't like it, Jim. Starfleet has no business ordering down an unarmed survey party -- much less you -- without a full security detail to back you up."

Kirk sighed. "We will not be unarmed," he said very patiently, as if speaking to a small child. "We will have two of Security's finest men with us. No enemy ships have been sighted in this area since we entered the quadrant. Starfleet feels the interference by the Klingons was an elaborate nose-thumbing gesture designed to be an irritant more than anything else. Headquarters believes we will be perfectly safe with the Enterprise in the area as a deterrent. Also, Sociology advises that too many people would only make matters worse. They still entertain the hope that the Klingon contamination can be minimized and the Arian put back on the right track..."

"Sounds like playing God to me," McCoy muttered under his breath.

"However," Kirk continued, scowling at the doctor, "they also feel that we must not compound the already existing error by having too many of our people running around, upsetting the natives."

Kirk glanced over to McCoy from the corner of his eye. "The message goes on about another two and a half pages -- would you like me to continue?" He did not wait for the doctor's answer. "Besides, what could possibly go wrong in a backwater place like this?"

McCoy snorted. "When it comes to you and the Klingons -- anything can go wrong!" He shook his finger at Kirk. "I still don't like it," he warned, and stomped from the bridge. At the lift, he turned to Kirk. "Jim?" he called, lines of worry etching his brow. "Watch your step."

Before Kirk could answer, McCoy was gone, and the Captain was forced to deal with his own creeping chill of premonition.

Hoping to catch a glimpse of a star through the windy gloom of the building storm, Kirk looked up at the churning Arian sky for the hundredth time. Of course he could not see anything, and kicked a rock over the edge of the precipice in sheer disgust. He glanced up and saw Spock watching him, a not-quite smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Telepathy was a marvelous gift and, when two people shared a link such as theirs, it was also a great timesaver -- Spock knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Well, we have been on this assignment a long time, Spock." Kirk laughed at his own petulant tones. He had been camped on this planet for two weeks while Spock had taken the Enterprise and made methodical sweeps through this corner of the quadrant, seeking the elusive Klingons. The First Officer had found no sign of the dreaded enemy, and it had been only last evening that Spock's latest sweep had been within legitimate contact range of the planet. Spock had rendezvoused with the landing party, ostensibly to drop supplies, before continuing on his assigned patrol.

"You've brought supplies to last a month, but I'm hoping another two weeks will do it. We should be able to reach a preliminary decision on the degree of cultural deviation of the Arian. Then we can leave."

Spock nodded. "While we were on patrol, I was able to study the language and some of the information gathered by the earlier surveys. They are primitive and harsh by anyone's standards."

Kirk mused, "I'm not sure I trust the Arian, Spock. I can't put my finger on anything, I just have gut sense of something wrong."

Spock waited for the Captain to continue, giving him time to sort his complex feelings into expressible thoughts. Kirk liked to talk through his "hunches" before acting on them, often times using his logical First Officer as a sounding board. When no further explanation was forthcoming, Spock queried, "Have they shown any signs of hostility?"

Kirk shook his head. "They've ignored the members of the Sociology team. That's what I think bothers me -- Klingons or no, of all the reactions I would have expected to a bunch of blue-shirted humans lurking in the background, it would not have been simply looking the other way. But that's Sociology's concern, I guess. They should know what they're doing."

"Have you ascertained why the Klingons were here?"

Kirk shrugged his shoulders slightly. "There's nothing here a self-respecting Klingon could use. The mineral content of this planet is poor and predictable -- unless you count the problems that trace element in the atmosphere is causing ship's sensors -- and the Arian would be worthless as slaves on the Klingon's heavy-gravity planets... not worth much except as a rather large burr under the Federation's saddle."

"Sir?"

The Captain smiled. "An old earth idiom, Spock -- means nothing more than causing one hell of an irritation."

Spock looked properly annoyed. And just when he thought he had heard all the "old earth idioms" from McCoy... He cleared his throat delicately. Even though the Captain seemed to find no real worth in the little planet, Spock did not wish to see an entire race of beings written off merely as an "irritant," even the people of Ari.

Smiling at Spock's anticipated reaction, Kirk turned toward the camouflage bubble that had been his home for the past two weeks. In the compound beneath the cliffs where the Arian dwelt, the rest of the party had set up their own tents wherever the ground had been level and soft enough to allow. It made for a scattered camp, which made the soldier in Kirk uneasy, yet anything more elaborate and secure would have created too much interest.

The wind had risen, making conversation more difficult. "Come on, Spock, let's get under cover before the evening version of the Last Deluge breaks loose," he half-shouted, ducking behind a jagged outcropping of rock that served as an excellent windbreak. He hesitated a moment before pushing on to the bubble and looked at the Vulcan. "When do you have to go back, Spock?" As much as he tried, he could not keep the hint of wistfulness out of his voice.

"I must break orbit in exactly 2.97 hours," Spock answered, a single brow lifted.

"I suppose I should let you go."

A questioning silence.

"On the other hand -- three hours would be just about right for a quick game of chess." More silence, followed by a very deep, very human sigh. "Then again -- I suppose you should go back and let Mr. Scott get to his engines."

"Mr. Scott is quite capable of remaining on the bridge another 2.97 hours." Spock's voice softened and he dropped the Vulcan facade. Their link glowed with the Vulcan's warmth. "I too have missed our nightly matches. A game of chess would be most enjoyable."

Both men started moving toward the tiny bubble, wind whipping their hair, pulling at their shirts. Attention focused on gaining the safety of the bubbletent, they did not hear the Arian natives land behind them, nor did they hear their stealthy approach. Only at the last possible moment was the Vulcan aware of the danger.

"Jim!" Spock shouted. But he was too late, and both Starfleet officers fell beneath the vicious attack of the people they had come to defend.

Pain. White hot burning agony that seared the flesh and scorched the mind.

His own, and one other's.

Spock! Kirk cried out. Where was he! Spock? he called again. Screaming came from all around him and he thought for a moment it was Spock, fear for the Vulcan nearly drowning out all other concerns.

A pain equal to his own and a fear far greater rolled through the link. Jim!

Kirk fought the bonds that held him, fought the agony that crippled him. I'm coming, Spock! he promised. Wait for me he pleaded, fighting the sticky black unconsciousness that sucked him down.

Kirk awoke screaming Spock's name. Claws of fire worked their way across his naked chest. He frantically searched the link one more time, then clamped his mind down on the waves of pain, shutting Spock out of the link, shutting the Vulcan away from his own torment.

Tied spread-eagle to the ground, he struggled against the single band pinning his head until he could see the burning flesh of his chest. An Arian stood over him, owl eyes wide and unblinking, the beak-like mouth stretched into a terrifying parody of a human smile. One taloned hand held a giant claw, the other, a hollowed gourd. The creature grinned even wider, dipped the claw into the gourd and pulled it out, dripping a thick green slime. It began to drag the poisoned claw once again across Kirk's chest. The claw raked deep wounds in the pale human flesh, flesh that decayed and turned black as the poison did its work.

Beyond the torture, beyond his own certain death, the Captain had only one thought -- Spock. Where was he? Was he alive? Kirk was not sure he wanted him to be. He silently prayed that Spock would have the common sense to seek the inner protection of his mind, leaving this senseless torture behind.

And what of the rest of the landing party? Where were they? Were the others suffering the same agonies he endured?

Kirk fought the ropes, desperately trying to escape the pain, loosening the strap holding his head enough to see around him. The screaming had stopped and Lieutenant Cannon, the petite blond psychologist of McCoy's recent interests, lay dead at his side, lovely young face swollen and distorted in a bloated mask of death. His heart ached -- to think that McCoy would have to see her this way... see all of them. He would be so hurt.

Beyond Cannon's body lay five others, tied as he was, also dead. And Spock, was he there as well, beyond his line of sight? Dying a death too horrible to imagine? Tears sprung to his eyes. Oh Spock, his soul cried.

His entire body encased in green flames, Kirk slowly began to lose consciousness. A single tear tracked down his cheek -- a tear for the lost lives, for the silver lady he would never see, but most of all for the friend he would never touch again.

Night had given way to day and the nocturnal Arian sought their darkened caves, reluctant to leave their grisly sport. When their new friends returned, they would be

pleased. They chattered excitedly among themselves. They had been told to kill all intruders while the soft black ones were away, and had fulfilled that order with an energetic zeal that would have shocked even the Klingons. The parching sun rose high overhead and then began its steady decent toward sundown.

Spock was frantic, struggling to free himself and get to Kirk. He forced himself to remain conscious, refusing to permit even the lightest of healing trances. Over and over again he sought the human through their link, only to face an impenetrable barrier of writhing scarlet. He must find a way around it — he must find his friend. He knew, cell by cell, what the poison was doing to his own body — he knew full well what it would do to Kirk if the universal antidote were not administered in time. He must break free and help the Captain.

The Vulcan breathed deeply, gathered the dwindling energies of his body and pushed outward, forcing battered muscles to respond. At last the cords holding him snapped. He struggled to his feet, head spinning and vision blurring with the effects of the poison. His own time was short, he realized.

Precious moments were wasted while he was forced to make a body by body search, relief and desperation mingling when he did not find Kirk. When he did finally find him, he was unable to tear his eyes away from the savage wounds on Kirk's chest — from the creeping black of decaying flesh that withered as he watched. He knelt down, one hand lightly brushing the temple. Alive, certainly. For the moment. Perhaps he was not too late.

He knew he must hurry. More time was lost while he searched for one of the medical kits that was standard equipment for a team such as this. When he found one, its contents had been pawed and strewn about, but the precious hypo and a single dose of universal antidote remained blessedly intact.

After administering the serum to Kirk, he waited for any changes in the human's condition. Simultaneously, he scanned the area, searching for a phaser, a communicator — anything to aid in Kirk's escape. But the equipment had been scattered about and smashed. At last the sooty tinge of the human's skin began to fade, replaced by a healthier pink. His pulse grew stronger and steadier. Too weak to take Kirk away to a place of safety himself, he dare not call attention to the Captain by actually treating the wounds. He loosened the straps holding his friend enough to permit escape yet not enough to be noticed.

Without a phaser or communicator, Spock counted his own chances of survival vanishingly small, and those of the Captain only slightly better. His tenacious hold on consciousness slipped even as he weighed the alternatives. Before he would allow himself the haven of oblivion, however, he had one last duty to perform.

Spock harbored no illusions that if the Klingons arrived, they would not mount a thorough search for survivors among the Federation team. If by chance he were found alive, he would become a prisoner of the Empire. They would know Kirk was not far away, and his friend must be protected at all costs.

"Forgive me... my friend," Spock grated, lifting one hand to the meld position on Kirk's face, "but you must live." Their link went deep, to the very essence of Kirk's soul. He would plant the knowledge necessary to survive; his eyes became glazed and distant as he slipped into the meld, his lips moving silently.

At last Spock let his hand slide from the meld to the Captain's neck and administer the nerve pinch, longer and much more forceful than any Kirk had ever witnessed. The effect was a suppression of all body functions -- "death" to the untrained eye.

The gamble -- that Kirk would remain unconscious long enough for the Arians to discover his "death", and that when Kirk did regain consciousness, he would have the instinct and knowledge to keep quiet until he could manage escape and contact the ship. The odds of success -- minimal.

Spock resisted the need to lie beside this human and wait for whatever Fate had in store for them. Instead, he crawled to the other side of the compound, laying a trail away from his friend.

Night fell and shattered any hopes Spock may have had for rescue by Scott and the **Enterprise**. His Vulcan ears heard the silken whispers as the Arian took flight from their lofty caves, fell to the ground in graceful swoops, and settled soundlessly in the compound.

The leader and tribal witchdoctor of the Arian moved purposefully from one captive to the next, ordering the withered blackened bodies to be dumped into the ravine. Spock knew that cleft had sensored 207 feet deep and Kirk would not survive the fall.

The leader paused at Kirk's body, taking longer to inspect it than he had the others. What would he find? Spock's mind clamored. The too pink skin? The invisible pulse? The soft sigh of respiration?

Apparently satisfied, the Arian ordered Kirk thrown into the ravine with the other vermin.

"Hold!" Spock shouted in the gutteral chirping that was the language of Ari.

The Arian warriors stopped, frightened at the sound of an alien monster speaking their tongue. The witchdoctor moved closer to Kirk's body, raising the poisoned claw for a final blow; his stare never left Spock's face.

"Do not touch him," Spock commanded, forcing himself to a sitting position. "He was the Great Son of Great Fathers. Touch him and his spirit will suck your souls, spewing them forth to become the spoor that your children and all their children will walk upon."

The Arian chattered excitedly to one another. To be cursed in such a way meant a lingering death beneath the rays of a burning sun. No glory, no honor, pariahs of their own people. None of the warriors were willing to risk that. Only the witchdoctor hesitated, finally taking an uncertain step away from Kirk. Relief washed over Spock -- at least the first part of his plan had succeeded. The rest was up to Kirk. He must awaken, find shelter and survive until Mr. Scott could locate him and formulate a rescue.



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A savage scream rent the air. The witchdoctor moved on Spock, waving the poison claw and screaming his rage at the Vulcan. "Die! Die! Die!" he cawed maniacally.

Too weak to offer resistance, Spock lay back in the dirt and composed his mind and heart. He prayed that he did find the sanctuary of death before the Klingons returned to learn who the Arian captives really were.

Spock was slapped again. And again. He tried to turn his head, to lift his hand defensively, but was unable to move. Clamps gripped his head at the temples and thick biting restraints held his hands and legs.

"Vulcan! Awake!" Again he was slapped, his head ringing with the impact. "You filthy coward!"

At last he opened his eyes, unable to recognize the bare gray wall he faced, unable to recognize the rough rhythm of an unfamiliar ship's engines. He was held immobile in a huge chair.

A single form moved into the Vulcan's line of sight.

"I knew it was you," the Klingon sneered, "just as soon as the Arian described their captives."

Spock's head snapped with a vicious backhand.

"Too bad Kirk didn't live -- what I wouldn't give for him to see this!"

Spock touched the link. The barrier was still very much intact, Kirk still lived. And they had not found him. Spock inwardly rejoiced.

Another slap. Spock refused to spit the blood that gathered in his mouth, refused to give the Klingon the satisfaction of the knowledge of even that small injury.

The Klingon grabbed Spock's chin, forcing it painfully upwards against the clamps. "You should be grateful, Vulcan, crawling on your hands and knees thanking me for saving your miserable life. I stopped those creatures from tearing you to ribbons and gave you the antidote. I thought we should have time to chat, discuss old times." The Klingon smiled grimly. "You do remember me, of course?"

Spock did remember him and realized what sort of chair he sat in. His Vulcan mask remained in place but something in his eyes must have given him away.

The Klingon grinned. "I thought you would." He patted the machine that hung above Spock's head. "However, this is a better model, guaranteed to strip even a Vulcan bare of every shred of intellect. And what this mind-sifter doesn't want, it chews up and spits out like garbage. Mental garbage!" He laughed raucously at his own foul joke. "I can program it to seek out exactly what I'm looking for."

It had not been easy to withstand the vicious probe of that first encounter with the mind-sifter. If this new version were capable of shattering a Vulcan's shield -- and Spock did not doubt the Klingon's claim for an instant -- he had cause to fear it. The deadly machine exuded a menace he could not ignore.

"Why has the **Enterprise** not discovered your ship?" Spock rasped through swollen lips.

The Klingon stared at him, then shrugged. "I suppose it will do no harm to tell you -- you're not going anywhere." He grinned, rubbing gloved hands together in expectation, and relaxed back against the wall, careful to remain within Spock's line of vision. "That 'trace element' in the atmosphere of this planet that your Federation decided was worthless, when condensed and combined with other elements, makes a perfect invisibility shield. We were away testing the formula when you arrived."

Spock started, remembering odd reports of random violence that always closed with the notation that no one had actually seen the attackers. With such an invisibility shield, the potential for destruction was unlimited, quite possibly heralding the end of the Federation. He must survive to get this information back to Starfleet, he must...

"Don't look so glum," the Klingon sneered as he moved to stand beside the controls to the chair. "The formula is not that efficient, the effect unfortunately only temporary. In order to gather enough of that prime ingredient to make the formula work, we would have to strip that planet bare of all atmosphere just to have enough to cloak a small attack force." He started laughing again. "Which would not be a bad idea considering it would destroy those winged parasites that live there!"

His eyes grew cold and deadly. "Do not worry yourself over their fate. Concern yourself with your own... Vulcan. We need other sources of that element besides this one small planet. I'm sure that information is logically stored in your mind, and I intend to get it."

He flipped a single switch which caused the machine to whine into life. "You are about to beg for my mercy and a quick end to your vile existence."

Spock realized he had no chance, and began a quick descent into the deepest state of protective meditation, shutting down functions, closing door after door, erecting barrier after barrier. He would protect Kirk and their vast store of Starfleet data. He felt safe, this far deep in his mind, and allowed only the barest instinctive reflexes to remain on the conscious level, enough to fool the Klingon.

He waited. Suddenly, he experienced an agony so grotesque, so unbelievable, he cried out in horror. Through level after level the mind-sifter bore down on him, ripping, tearing, opening and destroying all that lay in its path. It filed the information its programming considered vital, and what little remained was ground up and stirred about, so wretchedly distorted, that even the most basic instincts were destroyed.

Spock now understood and accepted the strength of this new device and knew it was quite capable of breaking through the command training and learning the Starfleet secrets the Klingon sought. Even more terrifying was the knowledge that the machine was also quite capable of finding the link with Kirk and tracing it to the Captain.

He knew real terror. Through the bright haze of pain, Spock held to a single purpose -- he must take the link and the information and bury them so deep, so far below any level he himself had dare explore, that even the mind-sifter could not find them. He would preserve that which they had shared and perhaps one day, if they lived...

Taking the beloved link, he wrapped it in layer after layer of protective memory, wrapped it tightly until the vibrant glow was dulled and hidden. Then, holding that little nugget of eternity, dove for the deepest levels of his mind and there hid the precious gem, safe from all who would come, safe from even the mind-sifter.

Secure in the knowledge that Kirk was safe and the knowledge beyond the Klingon's reach, Spock returned to the upper levels and threw open his mind to the ravaging beast. He whispered three words to that buried gem, three words of remembrance, and gave himself up to the machine. Long before it reached that level, he would be quite insane and of no use to anybody, especially the Klingons.

It was an acceptable alternative.

Kirk awoke in a cold sweat, his stomach tied in sour knots. He could hear sickbay, smell the antiseptic smells that meant safety.

And yet...

Fear. The distilled essence of terror.

He was steeped in fear, reeked of it. "Spock?" Something was terribly wrong.

Spock.

"Dear God," he gasped. There was an absence in his mind, a wind tunnel of loneliness wailing through his soul where once the warmth of Spock had dwelt. He sent his mind along the link, searching, calling out and found -- nothing.

That was impossible. Yet, where the link had been was simply... nothing. No wound, no agony of separation, no shining thread to the beloved soul-mate.

Nothing left to mourn.

Nothing left, save the silence.

It had been like this every morning since Scott had beamed him aboard, more dead than alive. Two weeks of waiting, two weeks of days and nights suffering the agony of not knowing what had happened to Spock -- only knowing that he had not yet died. When consciousness had first returned, he had destroyed his own barriers, sought the link and had discovered the emptiness within.

The Arian compound had been deserted when Scott had finally managed enough sensor contact to locate the landing party. Kirk alone had survived the ordeal. Of Spock, they had found nothing.

Still weak and easily tired, Kirk spent his days performing his duties to the best of his abilities, doggedly pursuing a futile planet-by-planet search for Spock. Did the Klingons have him? he wondered, but his battered mind glanced away from that thought, and he returned to the sanctuary of routine.

His days might have been his own but his nights belonged to McCoy. The poison had permeated his body to such an extent that the doctor had been unable to completely purge it from his system. Every night he returned to sickbay and every night the doctor tied him into the most sophisticated blood-scrubbing machinery the Federation had to offer, cleansing the worst of the impurities from Kirk's body. Soon it would be unnecessary, but for now, the process was vital to his very existence. The sessions always left him totally exhausted.

And he would sleep ...

and dream ...

and wake up alone, so terrifyingly alone.

His mental panic set off the monitors above the bed. "Easy, Jim, just take it easy," McCoy soothed, at his side moments after the alarms had sounded. He patted the trembling shoulder. "Another bad one, huh?"

Kirk tried to smile and could not. "Same one. Nothing there. Nothing. It's like I'm in a huge room and somebody switched off the light. And all I have to do to find Spock is to turn it on again." He shook off the comforting hand and turned to face the wall. "But I can't find the switch." His last words were lost in a stifled sob.

McCoy wanted to hold him, console him, make promises he could not keep, anything that would ease the Captain's loss. But he knew nothing he could do would make that hurt go away. Well, at least he could sit there, be here. Communicate, however silently, his love and concern.

The doctor had grown increasingly worried about the captain. In spite of all his efforts — in spite of all that his sickbay could offer, Kirk was not recovering as he should. He had permitted the captain to return to the bridge — a firm believer in letting the sick and wounded return to a normal routine as quickly as possible. But now he questioned his own judgment, knowing the medicine he could offer was not what Kirk needed. He wondered if Kirk's indomitable will could pull him through this one, and refused to consider the consequences if it could not.

The sounds of the bridge were usually comforting to the hurting Captain, but these days they seemed more to irritate than to comfort. Starfleet, out of a misplaced sense of guilt when the official search had ended in failure, had kept Kirk on routine patrols and mapping missions, when what he craved and needed was a little two-fisted action — something at which he could scream and shout and vent his rage.

Sitting in his command chair, he did not see Uhura straighten in her seat, settling the earpiece more firmly in her ear. Her face swam with emotions. At last she turned to the Captain.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Communication for you, sir. It's from Vulcan."

Kirk felt a knot of icy dread settle against the base of his spine. Vulcan. He had already sent a tape, explaining all he could to Sarek and Amanda, offering his explanations and apologies. At this point, he had nothing more to tell them and wondered what they could possibly want. "Put it on the main screen, Lieutenant."

She nodded and slipped the tape into the console. At once Sarek's face filled the screen. "Captain Kirk. Spock has been found alive but gravely injured. He was abandoned at a freeport at the edge of the neutral zone. Pieces of his Starfleet uniform enabled the authorities to identify him. Evidently his captors -- the Klingons -- wanted it known who they were and what they had done to him. The Vulcan High Council was contacted and arrangements were made to have him returned to Vulcan. His mind had been stripped bare. The Healers agree that he was the subject of the mind-sifter. They also agree that Spock should be placed in their care and they be allowed to take the remnants of his mind and heal him, if it is within their abilities to do so. As Spock's parent and the head of his family, I have given my consent." Sarek seemed ready to terminate the message when he realized how his words must sound, and exactly to whom he was speaking. "Captain Kirk... James... the Healers will do all in their considerable power to help Spock. You must place your faith in them, as we have. I will inform you of any change in Spock's condition," Sarek raised his hand in the formal salute. "Live long and prosper, friend of my son."

The screen faded to the normal star pattern. Kirk did not notice. He kept replaying Sarek's words in his mind. Spock had been found. Spock had been the subject of a mind-sifter probe. Spock had been given over to the care of Vulcan Healers.

"Dammit!" Kirk swore, slamming his fist into the arm of his chair. Just who in the hell did they think they were? Sarek knew how deep their friendship went, knew of the bond and all it stood for. And yet, Sarek had not asked what he thought should be done for Spock. He very much feared for Spock's human half, for that vital human spark that set Spock apart from other Vulcans.

Kirk looked around him. He had to get away, had to talk to Bones. Maybe he could explain what Sarek had said and make some sense of it all.

Heart pounding, he stood on legs made weak with fear and relief. "Sulu, you have the con."

He found McCoy in sickbay, sitting quietly at his desk. "Uhura said you were on your way down, Jim, said Spock had been found.

Kirk nodded and sank gratefully into the chair in front of McCoy's desk. He tried to compose his thoughts into some kind of coherent pattern but failed. There was only one thing he was certain of -- Spock was alive and he felt a desperate, compelling need to see him, to touch that face and beg... plead for some sort of recognition.

Fury, fear, trepidation, terror, all swirled in a maddening maelstrom that sucked him down, pulling him into his own brand of insanity.

McCoy became alarmed at the pallor of Kirk's face and the white-knuckled hands that clutched the edge of his chair. He stood and moved to Kirk's side, grasping his shoulder. "Jim?" No response. "Jim!" He shook the shoulder.

Kirk raised tear-bright eyes to meet his. "He's alive, Bones, but Sarek says his mind is gone. How dare Sarek claim that he is alive... without his mind?" Kirk demanded hoarsely. "I have to go to him, Bones, I know I could help him, bring him back... "

"He's with the Healers, Jim. They're the ones who can help him now."

"No!" Kirk snapped, pushing McCoy's hand away.

"Now you listen to me, James Kirk," McCoy said and knelt beside the chair, his eyes locking with his Captain's. The love and concern shining in them softened his harsh tones. "Sometimes in our eager acceptance of those we love, we forget who they really are. Spock's half human, but he's also half alien, and he was born and raised in that alien culture. Perhaps Vulcan is what he needs, no matter how much it hurts. I could cure the body, Jim, but what good would the body be without the mind?"

Kirk shook his head. "You don't understand, Bones. They won't allow for the human factors in his mind. They'll treat the Vulcan but Spock will be lost."

McCoy stood and moved to sit on the edge of his desk. He toyed with a stylus, unable to meet Kirk's gaze. "It's not a matter of what I think, Jim, or even a matter of what you think. It's a matter of what is. Sarek chose to turn him over to the Healers, and that is what is. I think at this point the best thing for you to do would be to accede to Sarek's wishes and not cause any problems. Sarek made a decision he believes best for Spock's mind. I'm sure he didn't make that decision easily."

Kirk did not answer. The silence stretched for many long moments. At last he looked up at McCoy. "All right, I'll wait, do as Sarek says. But once Spock has recovered, Bones, I'm going to see him, find out exactly what's happened."

The pain and hurt on the Captain's face was almost more than McCoy could bear. "Jim, the link is still there, isn't it? I mean, even if things don't turn out the way you want them to..." McCoy hesitated, not sure how to continue. "You'll still have the link. What I mean is, someday..."

Kirk leaned back in the chair, suddenly too weak to do more than sigh. He smiled a tiny reassuring smile. "Yes, Bones, the link is still there and the hope of 'someday' may be all I have -- hope that may have to last a lifetime."

With that, there was nothing left for Kirk to do but hope... and pray... and remember.

Kirk initialed the last of the reports and shifted the thick stack to one side of his desk. The chronometer caught his eye, day and date displayed in Standard and Vulcan. He took a deep breath against the pain. It had been six months since the message from Sarek. In all that time, he had received no further word. Nothing to mark the passage of time for Spock, save one lonely human who stayed the night, watching the chronometer as it moved from one day to the next.

His duty shift began in five minutes. Only on the bridge did he feel a sense of inner peace, as if somehow the presence of Spock were more real up there. Even the cutting pain he always felt when he looked at the Science Station and saw an unfamiliar back had receded a little.

He set the reports in his OUT basket for Rand to handle, dimmed the lights and headed for the turbolift.

Moments later, the lift doors opened and Kirk walked onto the bridge, gaze immediately moving over the various screens and readouts. All was well on his ship, as well as could be expected. He moved to his chair, automatically taking the fuel consumption report and scanning it. He pointedly swiveled his chair away from the Science Station, unaware of the exchange of glances among his worried crew.

"Report, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered, and only half-listened to the routine activities of the previous shift.

Time passed all to slowly for Kirk. Sometimes he was surprised to find that as many as thirty seconds would go by without his turning to Spock for an opinion, looking to the Science Station for that familiar arched eyebrow of comment, or simply thinking of Spock.

I must be getting better, he thought wryly. Time doesn't heal all wounds, just puts a safe bumper between the raw agony of loss and the vulnerable human soul.

"Captain," Uhura interrupted. "It's personal sir... communication from Vulcan."

Kirk sat frozen to the chair, his blood a painful, pounding roar in his ears. He swallowed against the dryness in his throat and stood. "Give me a few minutes and pipe it to my quarters, Lieutenant."

Once in his cabin, he activated his desk terminal and Sarek's face filled the screen. Deep lines seamed the familiar visage where no lines had been before. "Captain Kirk. The Healers have released Spock. He is... well. He has decided to retire from Starfleet and accept a position at the Vulcan Science Academy. He no longer desires to be involved with anything contaminated by the violence of Starfleet. I have accepted the responsibility for this breach of Spock's privacy by informing you of his health and his decision. I did not think it... proper that he simply terminate the friendship without due explanation."

Sarek's face was replaced by the Lady Amanda's. "Jim, I wish the news were better, but the decision was Spock's. If you would like to visit him one day, I'm sure it could be arranged. Live long and prosper, Captain Kirk... Good-bye, Jim."

The transmission ended and he stared at the empty screen. He was shocked, stunned beyond belief. Spock, was well. He should be shouting and jumping for joy... but there was something more, some odd quirk to Sarek's words and a look of open pleading in Amanda's eyes. Her invitation set off klaxons in Kirk's mind.

His breath quickened as anger washed through him. This is wrong, he thought grimly. I listened to Sarek. I listened to Bones -- I waited and kept my silence, and this is the result. No more. I'm about to do some talking, shouting if need be, and somebody's going to listen.

The anger turned to a surge of adrenaline. There would be no more waiting, no more patiently standing aside while others played with their lives. If he were going to lose Spock, it would not be without a fight.

He slammed open a com line to the bridge. "Lieutenant Uhura, I'm going to Vulcan. Put the request through to Nogura for personal leave. Seven standard days. If he doesn't agree, pipe it down here."

"Yes sir!" she snapped, glad he could not see her grin or hear her wish the Vulcans not-the-best-of-luck in their encounter with one very determined, one very not-to-be-denied Captain Kirk.

Twenty minutes later, Uhura opened a channel to Kirk's quarters. "Personal leave confirmed, sir, seven standard days."

"Thank you, Uhura. My travel itinerary's in the computer if you need me. But it had better be good, Lieutenant."

"Yes sir," she grinned again. "And... Captain? Good luck!"

Sarek met him at the port and escorted him to ShiKhar. Beyond the fact that Vulcans never engaged in small talk under the best of circumstances was the one fact that Kirk sensed Sarek's unease. It seemed that being linked with Spock had made it easier for him to "read" other Vulcans. The silence stretched between them like the empty desert below until they approached the house.

"You will find him changed, James," Sarek warned, almost at the last moment, and sadly it seemed.

"I understand that, Ambassador," Kirk answered. He was convinced he could reverse that change. He would talk to Spock, make him understand. He knew once he saw Spock, had the chance to actually speak with him...

Lost in thought, they were down before Kirk was actually aware of the journey ending. Amanda met them at the door and embraced Kirk briefly, much to his pleasure and surprise. He realized later that she was trying to prepare him.

"Spock is waiting for you in the garden, Jim."

Kirk nodded and hurried past her. He had already waited too long for this moment. Entering the garden, for once he did not see its lush cool beauty. He only had eyes for the tall, unmoving form that stood at its center. Heart pounding, he felt like running the last few steps, but instead kept a smooth, dignified stride, one becoming to a starship captain.

"Spock?" he called.

The Vulcan, dressed in flowing gray, seemed even thinner than when they had stood together on that rocky cliff. But the dignity was still there, the natural fluidness of form as he turned to face the human.

Then Kirk saw the eyes. Those same dark eyes that had once looked upon him with warmth and friendship were now cold and remote -- empty of all feeling. Kirk felt as if someone had kicked him in the gut. Everything he had feared all those long months stood before him in harsh reality.

"Why did you come?" The words were precise and proper, totally lacking in emotion.

"Because I wanted to see you. I couldn't just..."

"Honor my decision? Is it so hard for your human ego to accept that I might choose a path other than Starfleet?"

The words stung and Kirk hesitated. Was it only that? Ego? Could he not admit that Spock could live without him, would choose to live without him? No, their friendship had been real, the bond, the caring for each other had been real. That couldn't have been lost, he would not accept it.

"Of course you have the right to choose your own way of life, I've never denied you that. It's only that..."

"I have made my choice," Spock repeated.

Kirk bridled. "Yes, maybe you think you have. However, you once chose to call me friend... chose to stand by my side..."

His voice becoming a husky whisper, Kirk continued. "You did not choose this! Meld with me now, Spock -- meld with me and see what we shared. Then -- then send me away, if you can."

Kirk reached out with one hand toward Spock, but the Vulcan calmly moved back a step, maintaining a safe distance from Kirk.

"Spock... ?" Kirk pleaded.

The Vulcan waited a moment. "This discussion is pointless," he said, and carefully walked around Kirk and out of the garden.

Kirk was left standing there, staring after the retreating form, a thousand arguments dying on his lips.

He had come prepared to battle righteous Vulcan anger, to defeat protective withdrawal, to expose useless self-sacrifice. He had not come prepared to battle a cool, efficient cauterization by a non-emotional Vulcan.

"I'll see you later, Mr. Spock," Kirk half-shouted after the retreating Vulcan. It sounded like a promise or a threat. He was not sure which.

James Kirk stood in front of the huge window in his room and watched the searing Vulcan sunset. The strangely compelling landscape he had once longed to call home now seemed alien to him, harsh and threatening, wanting to take from him the one thing he was not willing to give. He would duel with all of Vulcan for her son, if he must, and he would win.

As the sun finally dipped below the horizon, welding scarlet desert sand to crimson sky, he wondered how many times the ancient sun had set over these sands, how many sunrises and sunsets had gone into making Spock what he was.

Was he fighting Fate? Going against the natural currents of the Universe?
Could he be so wrong that now Spock would simply walk away, without so much as backward glance?

No. The bond was there, had been there, is there, he kept reminding himself, and no Vulcan would turn away from that commitment.

It had been a subliminal thing, Spock always at the back of his mind, supporting, teaching, a soothing oasis of calm among his turbulent human emotions. He searched for the link and found only damning silence, a cacophony of silence echoing through the lonely chambers of his mind, making a mockery of the vibrant life that had once found refuge there.

He turned away from the window and went to the small oak desk in the center of the room. A sturdy little thing, with knees bent and toes curled, reminding Kirk of an old-fashioned cookstove, ready to pounce. It held a special place in his heart — Amanda's welcoming gift on his first visit to the family estate. He picked up and idly toyed with the smooth, wind-worn rock he had found on a hike through the desert. He had teased Spock that he was the sole owner of Vulcan's largest rock, and Spock had not deigned to reply, feigning insult, managing to stay ahead of the human for about three paces before turning and smiling ever-so-slightly, and saying quite possibly, the human was right...

Kirk's breath caught in his throat and he found it hard to breathe. He forced himself back from the treasured memory and put the stone back on the desk. Becoming lost in memories would not help him with Spock tonight. Dinner was only an hour away and he was not certain how he would face him, and what he would say. The brief encounter of that afternoon had left him frightened and puzzled. He suddenly realized Spock had not even called him by name. Both Amanda and Sarek had warned him that Spock was different but he had not brought himself to believe that -- thinking as soon as they were together again all the walls would come crashing down and everything would be as it was. He would not believe until this afternoon when he was bathed in the frigid stare of the Vulcan how badly he had been mistaken.

Kirk had returned to his room and Spock had returned to the Science Academy, one feeling nothing but pain and loss and the other apparently feeling nothing at all.

A soft rap at the door interrupted his thoughts and he turned, listening. Again, the rap, gently and feminine. Not Spock. He checked his disappointment and opened the door.

"Jim, may I come in?" Amanda asked, brushing by him into the room without waiting for a reply. "I need to talk to you."

He smiled and nodded, closing the door behind her. "Of course."

"Sarek expressly forbade me to discuss Spock with you," Amanda began. "It's a severe breach of etiquette that I've even come, but I have to tell you all that's happened." She paced around the room, wringing her hands. Then habit took over and she put her hands at her sides, wiping all emotion from her face. She moved to the stuffed chair opposite Kirk's bed and sat down, hands folded in her lap.

"When they brought Spock to us, he was barely alive," she began, her voice growing soft and distant with an ache she did not try to conceal from Kirk. "Whatever poison had been used had depleted his system so much that he could barely function. Apparently the Klingons tried to administer an antidote of their own, but that only served to confuse Spock's autonomic healing systems even more. Once the Vulcan Healers negated the poison and the Klingon antidote, they endeavored to find his mind but found nothing, nothing at all except incoherent thoughts, bits and pieces of theories, no memories whatsoever..."

"I can not begin to describe to you the chaotic mess that was all that remained of Spock's tremendous intellect. It was Sarek's decision to let the Healers have him. I argued with him, Jim, I begged him to find other help. At least to contact McCoy. The Healers had never dealt with a Vulcan/Human hybrid before, at least not on that level. They had no guide, did not recognize the remnants of his human half. What they managed to put back together is not Spock, but the Vulcan ideal... And that's who you saw today, a Vulcan more Vulcan than even the Masters of Gol."

While Amanda spoke, Kirk had moved back to the window. The desert emptiness before him seemed to reflect and magnify the emptiness in his heart. For a moment, fear was paramount in his mind, fear that he would never see Spock again. And then anger, a good clean anger that burned away the last vestiges of any doubts that Kirk may have had.

He turned away and walked back to Amanda. Holding out his hands, he helped her to rise. "Amanda, I won't accept this. I can't."

He escorted her to the door, determination settling on his face. "I'm going to commit a slight breach of etiquette, Amanda, and confront Spock at dinner tonight. I'm asking your forgiveness now, and beg your understanding."

Amanda smiled. She reached out and touched Kirk's cheek lightly with one hand. "Whatever you have to do to bring Spock back to us is worth it, Jim. Sarek may not understand immediately what's happening, but he will after I explain 'the logic of the situation'."

He took her hand and kissed it affectionately. "We'll find him Amanda, I promise," he reassured, wondering if he could keep his word.

Amanda left the room, the smile slipping away as she assumed the role of Sarek's wife. Kirk closed the door softly behind her, her trust in him filling his soul with a warmth he had sorely missed.

McCoy had often said, where there is life, there is hope.

Spock was alive. He had hope. Somehow he had forgotten that for a moment.

Dinner was a stern, tense affair, with Amanda unable to look at Sarek or Spock. She pushed the colorful Vulcan vegetables back and forth on her plate, occasionally sipping the cool Vulcan wine.

Kirk waited the appropriate length of time, until the main course of the meal was finished and the light fruity desert was served. "Spock," he began, careful to keep his tone courteous and neutral, "if it is convenient for you, I would like to speak with you later in my room. I have several questions that need answering."

Spock looked up from his meal, his gaze as cold and as disinterested as before. "That is quite unnecessary. I have completed all reports required by Starfleet. I see no reason for further contact." He returned his attention to his food, dismissing Kirk's presence much as he would dismiss the presence of the air.

"Spock..." Sarek began, surprised at his son.

"No," Amanda intervened, "let them talk."

Kirk clenched his teeth, gripping his fork almost as tightly as he gripped his seething temper. With extreme patience and a very civil smile, he continued. "You're quite right, of course, Mr. Spock, but I still have a few questions that the reports did not answer to my satisfaction. I was the commanding officer of that mission, and something went terribly wrong. I wish to discuss it with my First Officer.

Spock raised twin eyebrows at him. "Indeed," he answered. "I was your First Officer. I have submitted my resignation effective, I believe, today." Spock finished,

placed his napkin to one side of his plate and rose. "I see no logical reason to continue this discussion. If you will excuse me. Mother, Father..." he nodded, starting to leave.

All the anger and pain and loss Kirk had kept bottled up these last six months suddenly exploded to the surface. It was all he could do to keep from reaching across the table and shaking some sense into Spock.

By painful degrees, he brought his surging emotions under some semblance of control. "Your resignation is not effective until twelve midnight, standard time, tonight," he said, his words dangerously soft. "Until that hour, you are still a sworn member of Starfleet. I was and am your commanding officer, and as such, I order you to report to my room tonight at twenty-three hundred hours." His eyes narrowed, his voice dropped to a whisper. "Do I make myself clear, mister?"

The Vulcan rose to his full height, gathering his dignity about him. He looked down at the human sitting before him. "Yes sir," he answered, totally without emotion, and left the room.

Behind Kirk, Amanda gasped, her fork clattering to her plate. Kirk paid no attention to her as he watched the departing figure.

He wanted to follow but could not. Kirk suddenly found the huge dining room too small, the cool atmosphere of the house too stifling. He had to be alone, had to think things through.

He excused himself, avoiding Amanda's frightened eyes, and went to the garden. Perhaps among the fragrant roses he could find peace and guidance.

All the confidence he had this afternoon had vanished. And he realized that quite possibly, the encounter with Spock tonight might be the last time he would ever see his soul-mate and... his friend.

The garden did little to improve his dark mood. Swinging between anger and fear, Kirk finally gave up any hopes of meditation and returned to his room. He sought solace in his favorite books hoping something would occupy his mind. It was a foolish endeavor; he could not keep his mind off Spock.

The minutes passed with agonizing slowness. Kirk refused to brood on the subject or to rehearse what he would say. Such rehearsals often had a nasty habit of becoming reality, and he would not be caught in that self-destructive trap.

At precisely twenty-three hundred hours, Spock rapped on the door. The rap was sure and firm. Not a hint of uncertainty. Kirk took a deep breath, sent a silent prayer heavenward, and opened the door.

"Good evening, Mr. Spock," he said, moving back a step. "Please come in."

The Vulcan walked past him, offering no acknowledgement. He took a position at the opposite end of the room from Kirk's desk.

Kirk closed the door but instead of sitting behind the desk, sat in the overstuffed chair, closer to Spock, yet not too close.

"What is it you wish to know," Spock began.

Kirk leaned back in the chair, projecting a calm he did not feel. He studied Spock through steepled fingers.

"I want to hear what happened to you."

"Specify."

"I want you to search your memory and tell me what happened to you... what happened to us."

Spock managed to look bored with the whole proceedings. "That is no longer your concern. If you wish further data on the mission, I will answer your questions when stated."

Kirk watched him carefully, looking for any sign of the Vulcan mask slipping. But there was no mask. This was real, this was Vulcan. And the indifference hurt worse than any charade ever could, worse than any heated accusations or acid rejections.

"I could make that an order," Kirk warned.

Spock stared at him a moment before replying. "Sarek told me of the bond between us. Sarek does not lie; therefore, it must be fact. I have found no evidence such a bond existed. If it did exist, it no longer functions and serves no useful purpose."

No useful purpose. The words were hollow and empty and made of ice. "Spock," he tried again, "the link is not gone. Had it been destroyed, I would have known... you would have known. Can't you do anything?"

Spock ignored the plea and moved to the door. "I have answered your questions. If you are not satisfied, that is your difficulty to remedy. Continued discussion of the subject is illogical and a waste of time." He turned to leave.

"Spock," Kirk called after him.

The Vulcan's face was a study in propriety; his ebony eyes simmered with controlled emotion. "This is my home. I suggest you do not interfere again. I will not tolerate such intrusions."

Spock opened the door —

Kirk rose to his feet and took one step toward the Vulcan, hand outstretched. "Spock, you can't just go..."

— and walked away.

"Spock," Kirk whispered, "... I need you."

At those three words, the Vulcan froze in mid-stride. A fleeting look of wrenching surprise crossed his face. He turned to Kirk, one hand reaching back. "It is not log..." he gasped, collapsing.

In one swift movement, Kirk was there, catching him, lowering him to the floor, cradling him.

The shrouded link burst forth with all the power and glory of a birthing star, spanning the frigid distance between them, bathing them both in a vibrant energy that fed the spirit and made the heart sing.

Kirk was enveloped in the glow, every nerve alive with the companionship and caring that was Spock.

Spock breathed deeply and rapidly, a thin sheen of sweat on his brow. Slowly he relaxed into the safe arms holding him, drinking in the warmth he craved. At last he looked up at his friend. "You came," he said.

Kirk found it hard to speak and just held him closer. "You knew I would, you knew exactly what I would say," he said in wonder. "You keyed the link to those three words." If only I had thought of it earlier. He added to himself.

"I had to be certain you were safe," Spock answered. "I had to know only you would find me."

"You foolish Vulcan," Kirk murmured, not knowing what else to say, rocking him slowly. "That was one hell of a chance you took. You couldn't be sure..."

Kirk's cheek rested against the dark head and he did not see Spock smile.

Chance had nothing to do with it. Spock had never doubted for an instant that Kirk would one day find him. And he had known exactly what Kirk would say when he did.

"I was not foolish," he stated simply. "It was a logical decision, logically arrived at."

Kirk chuckled, thanking all the gods of the universe for logical decisions logically arrived at.

It's time to go home, my friend, Kirk smiled.

Indeed, Spock nodded. **For both of us...**

The link filled with smiles and laughter and the bright promise of tomorrows without end.



VULCANSONG

by: Betsy Fisher



art: Chris Soto

We never seemed that close before
The night I knocked at the Captain's door
With heavy heart and feet of clay.
I'd lost a fight with death that day.
That's why the Captain said to me:
"Bones, let's stop by Rec Room Three."

I really did not want to go,
But the Captain is the boss, you know.
His hand on my shoulder as a guide,
He walked the corridor at my side.
At the door he winked with that knowing grin.
We paused for a moment and then walked in.

I saw you with your lyrette there
As we crossed the room and neared your chair.
Your harp's dark wood and tuning rings
Offset the gleam of silver strings.
Jim decided we would stay
When you sat down and began to play.

I'd heard your music once before,
Each melody a sweet encore
Which sprang to life as you sat down
As one with vibrant, lilting sound
Of music which you soul demands
With tender touch of artist's hands.

Such peace I saw upon your face,
So strange, so wise, so full of grace.
The alien strains suffused the air
As highlights danced on ebon hair.
All was hushed as your soul soared
Thru slender fingers on the board.

I watched your hands and smiled at Jim.
Delight transformed both me and him,
And as you played, I came to see
The message he was giving me.
Some battles won, some battles lost,
We can't waste lifetimes counting cost.



Within my heart the memory swells,
The tinkling sound of tiny bells.
Your haunting music, rich and fair
Beckoned a crowd to listen there,
Enraptured by your starship song,
To shed a tear or hum along.

For just as we, you chose to roam
And your gift assured us this was home.
Throughout the room there was no stir.
Your fingers on the strings, a blur.
With head bent low, your hands changed keys.
Does a Vulcan draw from memories?

Oh Spock, my friend, play wild and free!
Fill us with your melody
That we may share the joys and tears
To lend us courage all our years.
Help us know our inner worth
All thru this voyage and back to Earth.

It seems I've seen a part of you
That Captain Kirk already knew,
For how your music spoke to me
The night we stopped by Rec Room Three.

So play
for one who understands
The message shared by artist's hands!





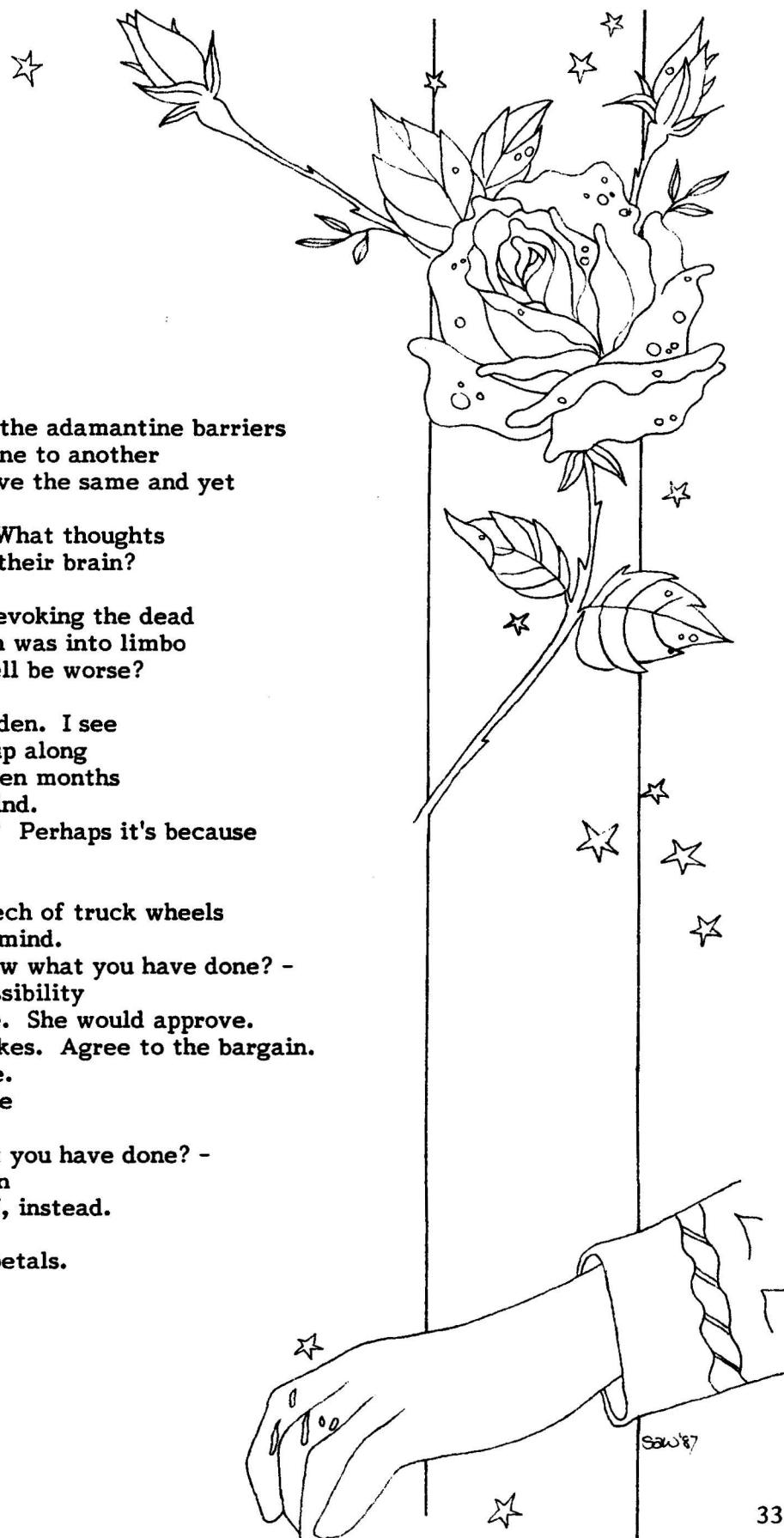
FREE WILL

by: Kathleen Resch

art: Shellie Whild

I would watch the stars tonight. Veering, my nomadic steps
take me elsewhere. For the first time
I cannot bear their presence. Their echoes, their voices,
their Lorelei seductions have fallen flat.
In the blackness of my mind I see them,
Brilliant reminders of what I have saved
and what I have lost.
They were my first love. But now their cut-glass glitter
draws blood. First love. Too harsh a reminder
of my last.

I choose a different place.
The garden is quiet. Empty.
In the darkness, fallen shards
of captains' decorations gather
like so much dust.
I didn't have any masks with Edith.
No expectations caused by rank.
No common meeting ground. Why
did recognition happen?
Is there any reason for love at all?
Or is it as meaningless as death
lying bloody on a dark New York street
centuries ago -- yesterday
meaningless. And yet
I know better
Surrounded by the unknowing lives I spared,
I can't bear to think of her at all.
my mind leaps, like a spasmodic, dying creature
impaled on some arrow descended from the air.
Another face intrudes. How strange.
Of all the people I have known
why think of Lazarus?



energy shatters on the adamantine barriers
forbidding access one to another
duplicate destructive the same and yet
insane

parallel universe. What thoughts
churn round inside their brain?

Lazarus is a name evoking the dead
but his resurrection was into limbo
could any hell be worse?

There are roses in the garden. I see
the way the thorns spike up along
each slender stem. It's been months
since we left Lazarus behind.

Why am I thinking of him? Perhaps it's because
I, too, am in hell.

Lost and undying
with the final screech of truck wheels
still burning in my mind.

- do you know what you have done? -

How odd. Is there any possibility
of gratitude? I let her die. She would approve.
if she knew the stakes. Agree to the bargain.

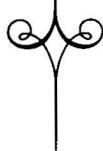
Dying for the cause.

To save a universe, her life
was all she had to give.

- do you know what you have done? -

I think I would have chosen
to take those steps myself, instead.

There is dew on the rose petals.
Dew on my fingertips
drawn from my eyes.



saw'87

THE BEAUTY

by: Betsy Fisher



OF IT

The once-sleek Klingon Bird of Prey thundered out of the clouds like a pelican caught in a hurricane, and landed unceremoniously with a shriek and a roar in the middle of Golden Gate Park.

In the flickering dimness of faltering interior lights, the command crew of the late, great starship **Enterprise**, came to its collective senses, looked dazedly about and then at each other.

Admiral James T. Kirk gave several explicit instructions to those clustered about him, then squared his shoulders and reached across to the navigation console to pick up his cracked spectacles and stuff them into the inside pocket of his civilian tunic. Around him the flurry of activity announced hurried preparations to disembark, except for the doctor who stomped about like a frustrated mongoose muttering epithets under his breath.

Some things never changed.

At Kirk's side, the still half-bewildered Vulcan stood prepared as always, for any undertaking he might be called upon to perform. Such was the unflagging loyalty of the newly reborn Captain Spock.

Kirk, turned his head slightly and stole an upward glance at his friend in the lumpy Vulcan "bathrobe", torn rag tied tightly about his temples to hide the tips of the elegant pointed ears. Jim sighed and quickly hid the smile of affection which lifted both his spirits and the corners of his mouth.

They left the "Bird" behind in the park, invisible and invincible. "Don't forget where we parked," Kirk reminded them.

By the time the sun climbed overhead, they were in the middle of downtown San Francisco.

Lost, confused, tired.

Kirk had already come dangerously close to losing an indispensable part of his anatomy to the grillwork of a speeding taxi. When he turned around and cursed the driver, he saw Spock staring at him, wide-eyed.

Mr. Robert O. Schreffler left his tidy office and descending the polished mahogany staircase to the main floor of his elegant second-hand and antique shop. He had always been much too proper to call it a "pawn shop". In his left hand he cradled the exquisite pair of valuable old Ben Franklin reading glasses and approached the two odd-looking gentlemen waiting beside a glass display case at the front of the shop.

Mr. Schreffler turned to the more contemporary of the two and spoke. "They're early eighteenth century, very valuable. I could offer you more for them if both lenses were intact. However, I'll give you one hundred dollars."

The contemporary one stared hard at him with a puzzled expression on his mobile face. "Is that a lot?"

Before Robert could answer, the other one, an over-age "hippy" type, tugged at his companion's sleeve, drawing him away nearly out of earshot. "Weren't those a gift from Doctor McCoy?" asked the old hippy in a deep, serious voice.

The auburn-haired contemporary shrugged, an unusual gesture, accomplished with a tilt of the head and two slightly raised eyebrows. He then smiled reassuringly at the (mentally deficient?) hippy. "That's the beauty of it Spock," he replied in a mysterious manner, "they will be again!"

The hippy frowned doubtfully, but backed off, looking a little disappointed.

Robert placed the bills in the man's hand and watched suspiciously as the two of them turned and walked out of his shop. He looked down at the gold-framed spectacles in his grasp and quickly unlocked a safety drawer beneath the counter. He placed them carefully inside on the red velvet, then closed and relocked the drawer. He'd overheard the auburn-haired one say: "... they will be again!" Did the pair of them intend to return later and steal them back from him... or what?

One could never be too careful. Robert was sure the gold spectacles would be safe until he could replace the lenses and more than double their value.

The Bird of Prey lurched crazily and spun out of control. She impacted with the frigid waters of San Francisco Bay and began to sink as though equipped with screen doors rather than durasteel bulkheads. Her living cargo, including the only pair of humpback whales in the universe and a strangely lovely twentieth-century human female, found themselves suddenly treading water beneath the old Golden Gate Bridge.

It was time to pay the piper.

The new **Enterprise** warped effortlessly and majestically away from the confines of the Sol system, headed "out there, that-a-way" in search of her maiden voyage.

In captain's quarters, Jim Kirk and his friend Spock bent in rapt attention over the game board of their first real chess match in a very long time. It had been nearly a half hour since either man had moved.

Kirk finally placed his white knight into check position, then leaned back in his chair beaming with expectant triumph.

Spock steepled his fingers, sat for a moment in contemplation, then picked up the black bishop and tipped the white queen. "Checkmate," he said calmly.

"Shit!" Jim Kirk exclaimed. He reached inside the pocket of his brand new uniform tunic, withdrew the gold spectacles and placed them low on the bridge of his nose. He leaned across the board and made great dramatic pretense of scrutinizing Spock's unexpected move.

As the Vulcan's eyes widened, Jim could not suppress the surge of marvelous feeling which began in the soles of his feet and radiated up his spine all the way to his shining eyes like a Roman candle going off. "Schreffler even had the lenses repaired to match my prescription," he mused quietly, trying hard not to acknowledge his friend's astonishment at the actual reappearance of McCoy's vanished gift. "Y'see, Spock?" he teased gently, "didn't I tell you ... ?"

Kirk felt, rather than saw, the black eyebrow crawl up the forehead of the graceful alien.

Spock uttered a long-suffering sigh. "I'll be damned!" He finally said.





THE TURNING POINT



by: *Ginna LaCroix*

art: *Christine Myers*

"Damn it, where is that man?" bellowed Leonard McCoy from his office. "This is the fifth time he's missed his physical!" As he appeared in the doorway, a group of medics scattered, terrified of meeting McCoy's wrath head on. "Has anyone seen James Kirk?" he yelled after the fleeing figures. The question was met by unhelpful silence. "That does it," he muttered as he went back into his office. "I warned him something would happen if he missed today's appointment." He hit the intercom. "Put me in touch with Security," he ordered.

"So, that's the whole set-up, Admiral," said Kirk as he sat back in his seat, resisting the temptation to give a deep sigh. He and Spock had worked weeks to overhaul the cadet training program. They had had endless meetings with practically every department head within Starfleet, and now Kirk had just presented their final and best version to Admiral Nogura and his staff.

There was a long silence before Nogura finally spoke. "That's a hell of a lot of work for one man to take on, Jim," he said doubtfully.

"Agreed," said Kirk, "but it's got to be done and it's got to start now. That's why I propose using my crew and my ship. We've worked together for a long time; we know how everyone thinks and reacts. We know what needs to be changed for the better, and what should stay the same. Then, once the program gets going and we've had a chance to train enough people to take over for us, we'll take the *Enterprise* back out."

"Admiral," said Spock quietly, "you yourself have repeatedly said the training program should be updated. Technical training is all well and good, as is book knowledge, but experience..."

"Is the best teacher of all. Yes, Mr. Spock, I know," said Nogura ruefully. He looked back at Kirk. "Jim, you are my best and most experienced officer. You fought me once before tooth and nail to get your command back. Why are you letting go again?"

"I'm not letting go, Admiral. The **Enterprise** and the crew aboard her are mine. But when I took her back from Will Decker, and in the years since then, I've become increasingly aware of how young the cadets are, and how woefully lacking their education has been in a lot of ways." He glanced at Spock, a slight smile on his face. "Maybe we just need a break. Deep space has a lure I don't think many of us will ever tire of, but civilization also has a lot of draws. This will give us a change, a chance to do a lot of good -- then we'll be ready to go again."

Silence fell as Nogura thought about what Kirk had said. "We don't have a lot of heavy cruisers," he said finally.

"We're at war with no one," said Kirk. "The **Enterprise** is due for a six month break anyway. She needs an overhaul, then she is going to sit idle. Why not put her to some useful work?"

"And your shore leave?"

Kirk grinned. "We've done star mapping for three months. The crew needs to work, Admiral, not play."

Nogura stared at him thoughtfully, then was interrupted by the buzz of the intercom. "Yes, what is it?"

"Uh, there is a detail here from Security Headquarters, sir."

"Security?" said Nogura in surprise.

"Oh shit!" said Kirk, suddenly remembering McCoy's thinly veiled threat concerning his physical. His comment caused Nogura to glance over at him. "I think they're here for me," he continued sheepishly.

"They say they have instructions to detain Captain Kirk, Admiral. "Something about disobeying orders ... " The yeoman's voice died away uncertainly.

By this time both of Nogura's eyebrows had risen to full height, and Spock was matching Nogura's astonishment with his own quieter, Vulcan reaction. Kirk blushed as red as a beet.

"They say they will wait until you are finished with your meeting, Admiral, providing you will personally vouch for Captain Kirk's behavior."

"I'll go quietly," promised Kirk at Nogura's questioning look.

"We'll be finished in a few minutes, Yeoman," said Nogura. He switched off the intercom, his eyes fixed on Kirk. "Would you care to explain why an armed guard is waiting for you?"

"I missed my physical," said Kirk.

"You missed your physical," echoed Nogura. "As I recall, that is not a court-martial offense."

"Well, it's not the first time, and McCoy warned me that he'd get me down there today. I didn't think he'd do something quite so drastic."

"I can see this cadet training staff of yours is indeed going to throw a different light on how things are done in Starfleet," said Nogura dryly. "Well, perhaps we should adjourn. Let me go over all your proposals again, Jim -- you can join your escort, and we'll meet back here later this afternoon, provided you're not in the brig. Is that agreeable?"

"It sounds fine, Admiral," said Kirk as he got to his feet. Nogura noted the polite formality contradicted the icy anger starting to show in Kirk's eyes, and inwardly chuckled. There was going to be one hell of a blow up when the captain of the *Enterprise* met the Chief Medical Officer. Remembering battles he had had with various medical departments in the past, he was pretty sure who would win.

"Fit and feisty," said McCoy with a grin as he finished writing with his stylus. "And still mad?" he added in questioning tone as Kirk swung off the examination table.

"That was a dirty trick," said Kirk, his eyes still dark brown.

"You had fair warning, Jim," replied McCoy. "Besides how are all these promotions going to go through if they don't have the required forms in the proper folders?"

"Promotions? What promotions?"

McCoy looked at him sharply. "What do you mean, what promotions?" He tossed a list over to Kirk. "Got this from the Admiralty the day we docked. Surely you knew about them."

Kirk looked at the list, his eyes narrowing. His name was at the top, along with Spock, Uhura, Sulu, Chekov, and a long list of junior officers. He glanced back at McCoy. "Nogura's up to something."

"God but you're a suspicious man," grumbled McCoy. "Jim, everyone on that list has survived at least one five year mission! Surely you would expect promotions, or would you be happier if everybody got demoted?"

"I still don't like it," said Kirk.

"Look, it's change. You're shaking up your entire crew, for pete's sake! Do you know how long it's been since I've been on the teaching staff of anything?"

"You could be my personal physician," said Kirk.

"I am your personal physician," groused McCoy, "and have been for more years than I care to think about." He clapped Kirk on the shoulder. "Come on, let's go have a drink."

They sat in silence for a while, McCoy watching Kirk while the Captain played with the bottle of Saurian brandy. "Anything else bothering you that we should talk about, Jim?" he asked finally.

Kirk smiled slightly. "Bones, we've talked ourselves out over the past few weeks." He sobered. "Are you having second thoughts about it?"

"About our taking a break for six months and knocking some sense into a bunch of cadets?" asked McCoy. He shook his head. "Nope. Actually, I think it'll be fun. If nothing else, I'll be able to pull rank if things get out of control." He watched Kirk as he stared at the bottle. "There is something bothering you."

Kirk glanced up at him, the illumination in McCoy's office highlighting the gold flecks in his hazel eyes. "It's nothing important."

McCoy looked skeptical. "You're concerned, so it must be something."

Kirk put down the bottle. "I've done an awful lot of paperwork over the past few weeks. I'm just tired."

"Uh huh," said McCoy. "What's the problem?"

Kirk looked at him for a minute. "I'm having trouble reading sometimes."

"How so?"

"Oh, trouble focusing, mainly. Headaches." He gave a lopsided grin. "You know what they say about weak minds and strong backs."

"Yeah," said McCoy dryly. "Stay there for a few minutes. Be right back."

Kirk had poured himself another drink when McCoy returned. The doctor took it from him and put it down on the desk. "Head back," he ordered. Kirk leaned back in the chair. McCoy fitted a small disc over Kirk's eye, then looked through it. After a couple of minutes he moved it to the other eye, then tossed the disc down onto the desk. "No problem," he said.

"Then why do I have trouble seeing?" asked Kirk.

McCoy looked up from pouring his drink. "Because you are a human being who's on the other side of puberty."

"Very funny," said Kirk.

McCoy smiled. "Jim, the lens of the eye loses some of its elasticity as we get older." He leaned back in his chair. "Remember those old movies where the characters often wore spectacles, some even wore something I think were called bifocals, two lenses in one -- helped the lens to focus after they had lost the ability to do it themselves."

Kirk stared at him. "I don't recall seeing anyone I know ever wearing glasses."

"Glasses went out years ago," said McCoy, "when some genius came up with something called Retinax Five -- made a hell of a lot of money too, as I recall. Anyway, Retinax Five restores elasticity to the lens, gets rid of all that fuzziness and difficulty in focusing -- headaches too."

"Headaches too?"

"You'll still be getting your share of little red pills," said McCoy. "Retinax Five does nothing to relieve tension." He got to his feet. "I'll give you a shot now, then another one in two weeks. After that you'll get one every six months until you don't want to use your eyes anymore."

Kirk glanced at the chronometer. "Well, hurry up. I've got another appointment with Nogura."

"You're not going to blow up over the promotion list, are you?" asked McCoy.

Kirk looked at him. "Not yet, not until he brings it up. I've got enough trouble pushing this cadet training program through."

"It's an ambitious plan, Jim."

Kirk smiled. "It's a good one, and we don't have much time to brainwash a lot of other instructors to do things our way before we set them loose on a bunch of unsuspecting kids." He ran a hand through his hair. "Actually, I'm concerned about Scotty. He's taking on the engineering cadets, plus overseeing the refit of the *Enterprise*. He's not getting any younger..."

McCoy snorted. "Might I say that about all of us, and I don't see anybody starting to slow down. You're looking suspiciously like going for yet another five year stint, which means all of us are facing the same future."

"Not if Nogura has anything to say about it," said Kirk. He looked at McCoy's quizzical expression. "Bones, look at who is on that promotion list. Spock -- a Commander. Sulu -- a Commander. If they get promoted, that's three captains..."

"Three?"

Kirk smiled. "I'm a captain too, at least as far as commanding the *Enterprise* is concerned."

"You're on the promotion list as well," said McCoy. Kirk stared at him without saying anything. "That's why you're upset, isn't it?"

Kirk sighed. "Maybe I'm reading something into this that isn't there, but I've worked with Nogura, Bones, and I know how he thinks." Then he shrugged. "Oh well, there's no use worrying about it, I guess."

"No one's about to break up this crew again, Jim. It's been tried and no one's wanted to go."

"Maybe they weren't offered enough," said Kirk quietly, then he laughed. "God, now I'm getting maudlin! I need that two week R&R more than I thought."

"Come on," said McCoy, "one shot of Retinax Five to go along with your brandy, then get yourself back to work."

"You're coming over to the apartment tonight, aren't you?" asked Kirk, completely changing the subject.

McCoy made a face. "Antiques are not the thing I want to be surrounded by, but yes, I'll be there."

"Great! Spock has found some weird recipe he wants to try out on us. I'd feel better at having medical help right on hand after that fiasco the last time he tried something like this."

"Amen to that," agreed McCoy. "I'll bring my kit."

"I think I've finally got all the stuff out of my quarters on the **Enterprise**," said Kirk, "but now I can't find the floor in my room."

"I have quite a lot of extra space in my room," said Spock from the depths of one of the kitchen cupboards.

"You needn't keep boasting about how organized you are," said Kirk. "What are you doing down there anyway?"

"Looking for a wok."

"A who?" asked Kirk.

A large, round silver bowl appeared on the counter, then Spock clambered to his feet. "A wok," he said again, indicating the bowl.

"Okay, I'll bite," said Kirk. "What does a wok do?"

"One uses it to cook with," said Spock patiently.

"A pot," said Kirk, comprehension dawning.

Spock looked pained. "Don't you have anything that you should be doing," he asked, "like cleaning the apartment?"

"We have maid service," said Kirk unhelpfully. "This is the twenty-third century, Spock. Food processors are normally used for..." He broke off at Spock's expression. "Okay, I'll go clean up my room." He hesitated when he reached the doorway. "Spock, would you take a captaincy?" he asked.

Spock stopped chopping vegetables and looked at Kirk. "Would I what?"

"You heard me," said Kirk.



"Yes, I did. May I ask why you would pose such a question when you already know what my answer will be?"

"A Human's insecurity, I guess," said Kirk. "Get on with what you're doing. I'll see what I can do with the mess in my room."

He was on his hands and knees stuffing things under his bed when McCoy came in. "My mother stopped me from doing things like that when I was about ten," said McCoy.

"Shut up," said Kirk as he pushed some more boxes out of sight. "I refuse to let Spock's room look neater than mine."

"Spock's not in the habit of carting around a lifetime collection of things," said McCoy mildly. "I passed through the kitchen. Dinner smells great, and Spock's worried about you."

"Worried about me?"

"The captaincy."

"Oh, that."

"That."

Kirk got to his feet. "I was just curious."

"Uh huh. I thought you said you were going to let Nogura make the first move."

"I am. It's just that Spock leaves for Vulcan tomorrow for two weeks and..."

"And you wanted to give him something to worry about."

Kirk looked sheepish. "I didn't think a simple question would cause such an uproar. Guess I shouldn't have asked." He looked at McCoy. "You packed for the beach?"

"Just about. Haven't been to Nags Head since I was a kid. I'm really looking forward to it."

"Me too," said Kirk. "From what you've told me, it should be fun."

"Here's to stir-fried vegetables and chicken," said McCoy as the meal came to an end. He raised his glass. "Where did you find such a delight, Spock?"

"An old cookbook in a musty little store on Saradan IV," said Spock. "There seems to be something for every taste included in it. The wok had been in my mother's family for years, although I don't remember her ever using it." He glanced at Kirk. "Not too many private homes have antiquated cooking facilities needed for its use."

Kirk flushed. "That was Lori's doing. She said processed food tasted like the plastic it was served on." He stared at his plate for a minute, then pressed a hand over his eyes.

"Jim, are you okay?" asked McCoy.

"What?" Kirk looked up. "Oh, yeah, just felt a little dizzy for a second — Spock's cooking, you know how it affects me." He got up. "You two go stoke the fire. I'll do the dishes."

"We have maid service," said Spock with a slight smile on his face.

"What? Oh, well... go on, that's an order." Kirk stacked up a pile of dishes and disappeared into the kitchen.

Spock cocked an eyebrow at McCoy. "Probably overwork," said McCoy. "It's the end of a long mission; he's been doing too much, being pulled in too many directions. His physical was an outstanding example of what a Human should be like at his age... hell, at half his age, although I wouldn't boast to him about it. After all the green leaves I've made him eat in his life, he'd never let me hear the end of it."

"His time with you by the ocean should help relieve that tension," said Spock.

"Indeed it will," said McCoy. "I'm sorry you're not joining us, Spock."

"My father has requested my presence on Vulcan," said Spock. "I also prefer desert sand to the sea. You and Jim will enjoy yourselves without me."

"He's always happier when you're around," said McCoy without any rancor. "However, I'll see to it he finds some relaxing pursuit."

"I am sure you will, Doctor," said Spock dryly.

"The Academy has accepted all your proposals, Jim," said Nogura, a smile on his face. "The staff will be at your beck and call for as long as you feel it's necessary."

"I signed on for six months, Admiral," said Kirk.

"And if in six months you find things haven't developed to your liking?"

"Then I leave the master plan with you and ship out."

Nogura got up and walked across the room. "Is that really what you want, Jim?" he asked.

"Sure it's what I want. It's what we all want."

Nogura turned back. "The promotion list went through while you were on R&R."

Kirk's eyes hardened. "That was a dirty trick, Heihachiro," he said.

Nogura's eyebrows rose. "A dirty trick to award the finest crew in Starfleet with what they deserve?"

"You're trying to break us up."

Nogura stared at Kirk, but didn't deny what he had said. "Your people still have a job to do here. However, I did have to reassign Pavel Chekov. The Reliant needed a First Officer. There was no one else readily available who had his experience. I hope you can do without him."

"Who else?" asked Kirk, his voice was like ice.

Nogura's eyes dropped. "A couple, but most of your bridge crew are there..." He looked back at Kirk. "I offered the Excelsior to Sulu."

"To Captain Sulu..."

Nogura nodded. "Captain Sulu." He walked back to his desk. "Jim, the Excelsior won't be ready even for test runs for a while, but since Sulu's going to be in San Francisco anyway, he might as well know what's in store for him so he can follow her progress." He put his hands on the desk and leaned forward. "You've got a good bunch of people. Don't hold them back." He pushed a list across to Kirk. "Take a look. That's something any commanding officer would be proud of."

Kirk looked, but a dizzy, sick feeling went through him, blurring his vision. So many names, so many reassessments...

"Promotions all," said Nogura as though he knew what Kirk was thinking.

Kirk finally focused his eyes. The names at the top of the list stood out. Kirk, James T. — promotion to Fleet Admiral, a higher rank than he had held when he had been Chief of Operations. Spock — promotion to Captain... "A Fleet Admiral doesn't command a starship," he said, looking at Nogura. "And Spock?"

"That's up to him." Nogura sat down. "I hear he's been delayed on Vulcan."

Kirk nodded. "He should be back in a couple of days."

"We'll talk to him then. Now, I want your comments on these questions that the Commandant of the College posed..." Kirk listened with only half of his attention. He had spent the past few months working hard on the cadet program that Nogura had posed to him the last time the **Enterprise** had visited Earth. The plan he had once thought as brilliant had backfired in his face, and he was about to lose the security of everything he had fought so hard to get back. Gradually he grew aware that Nogura had fallen silent.

"I'm sorry, sir." he said, "did I miss something important?"

"It depends on what you consider important," chuckled Nogura. "I just announced that I'm leaving the post of Commander, Starfleet at the end of the week, and I got no

reaction at all. You're the first person I've told, outside of my staff. I guess I was expecting more of a reaction."

"Oh... I... uh...." Kirk was at a total loss for words. For all the fights he had had with Nogura over the years, the Admiral had always been there. Now he had suddenly stated that he was leaving, and Kirk couldn't think of anything to say.

"Morrow's taking over," said Nogura. "Actually, he's been doing the job for the past year or so. He'll be all right."

Kirk nodded agreement. Morrow had commanded the first ship that Kirk had been assigned to after he had graduated from Starfleet Academy, and they had always got along well together. The man was more than capable of taking on the awesome responsibility of controlling the huge military complex that was Starfleet. "He will indeed, but I'm sorry to see you leave, Admiral."

"It comes to us all," said Nogura bruskly. "Well, if you have nothing else to add to this discussion, maybe we'd better call it quits. I've got some stupid social bash tonight and my wife will never forgive me if I'm late."

"Oh, Jim, there you are. Did you get the message I needed to see you?"

Kirk looked up at McCoy's voice. "Oh, uh, I guess so," he said.

"You guess so," said McCoy. "You're having a little trouble getting back to work after all those ladies at Nags Head, aren't you?"

Kirk gave a weak grin. "They sure were persistent. What did you want to see me about?"

"You need another shot of Retinax Five," said McCoy. "It's been two weeks — time for a booster." He brought out a hypo. "Can you read better than before?"

Kirk nodded. His eyesight was much better, but he had frequent spells of dizziness, sometimes accompanied by nausea. He suddenly wondered if there could be any connection. "Bones," he started, "I..."

"Admiral Kirk, is Dr. McCoy with you?" came the disembodied voice of Kirk's yeoman over the intercom.

"Yes, he is," said Kirk.

"The Surgeon General would like to see him immediately, sir."

"Oh help, our fishing trip!" said McCoy. He shoved the hypo against Kirk's shoulder. "I'll be back in a couple of days, Jim."

"You just had R&R," called Kirk to McCoy's disappearing figure.

"This is business!" McCoy's voice floated back into the room.

"Yeah, sure," said Kirk, "business to be conducted in the middle of an icy stream running with salmon." Shaking his head, he went back to ironing out the few remaining problems in the plan for the cadet training program.

The hours passed as Kirk worked steadily. He had very positive ideas on how he wanted this program to work, so sorting out problems was fairly simple. He vaguely remembered his staff coming in to say goodnight, but had been so engrossed in what he was doing that he had acknowledged without really realizing what time it was.

Finally he put his stylus down with a sigh. Everything was finally finished to his satisfaction. Tomorrow he would meet with the Academy staff and they would get this thing off the ground. He found himself wishing that Spock was back; it was always easier to do things when the Vulcan was there by his side.

He got up and walked over to the window, then stood looking out at the bright lights of San Francisco. How much longer would Spock be at his side? A Fleet Admiral and a Captain. Spock could have any ship in the Fleet that he wanted, go anywhere and do anything. Space was open to him. What could a Fleet Admiral do? How much influence did he have now that Nogura was retiring and Morrow taking his place? He knew it was Nogura's desire that he step aside for younger people. Did that same wish hold true for Morrow?

Suddenly he was gripped by a wave of nausea, and his knees turned to water. He found himself slumped at the base of the window before he had any idea he had fallen. He gripped the ledge until the dizziness passed, then slowly got to his feet. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest. He made his way to the couch and sat down.

Waves of nausea flooded through him. He curled up into a ball of misery, his arms wrapped around his stomach, wishing McCoy was there.

"Should have complained earlier," he muttered to his heaving stomach. "Bones would have an instant cure for your troubles. Now he's out fishing and I'm here feeling absolutely rotten. It's not fair!"

After a while he started feeling better. Cautiously he got up, but his legs held him with no problem. He stood uncertainly for a few minutes, then dismissed the idea of going to the medical department. "It's just overwork, and probably a touch of flu" he assured himself. "Think I'll go home and get a good night's sleep." A nagging voice at the back of his mind kept telling him that he had only just returned from a two week vacation, that his collapse couldn't be caused by overwork, but he ignored it.

The persistent buzz from the communications panel finally broke into Kirk's logged sleep the next morning. Groggily he swung out of bed and made his way to the communications console in the hallway. "Kirk here," he said, leaning against the wall.

"This is Uhura, Captain. The Academy staff is waiting for you at Starfleet Headquarters, as is your own staff..."

"Shit!" said Kirk. "What time is it?"

"0900 hours, sir."

Kirk groaned inwardly. Today of all days he had overslept. "Uhura, I'll be there in half an hour. Could you make up one of your fabulous excuses for me?"

"Consider it done," said Uhura with a chuckle.

By the time Kirk made it to Starfleet, he felt fine. The meeting went without a hitch and everyone was more or less in agreement when they broke for lunch. "We'll meet back here at 1400 hours," said Kirk, "then we'll split up into the groups we discussed this morning. I think we've covered as much general information as we need to."

Kirk accompanied Sulu and Uhura to lunch at the commissary. From the looks they received, it was obvious that command rank officers usually ate at more plush spots, but all three preferred the food served there, so met the surprised looks with tolerant smiles.

"Well, Sulu," said Kirk, once they had selected their meals and found somewhere to sit, "I hear congratulations are in order."

Sulu glanced at Uhura for a minute, then back at Kirk. "Thank you, sir, it is an honor..."

"One you deserve, and it's been a long time coming," said Kirk.

"And one I haven't decided whether to take or not," added Sulu.

"What?" Sulu's answer caught Kirk by surprise. He had been so sure Sulu's immediate answer to Nogura had been yes, that he found he was totally nonplussed. "Sulu, the Excelsior is ... "

Sulu smiled. "The ship of the future, I know." He sobered. "It is a real responsibility, sir. I've always wanted a ship, but now..." he hesitated. "I've seen enough and done enough to discover it's not just the ship that counts -- it's people." He flushed. "I guess I'm not making much sense. Everyone knows how you feel about the Enterprise..."

Kirk sat looking at him, remembering not the Enterprise but his reaction to the promotion list. He had not been jolted by the possibility of losing his ship so much as the possibility of losing the people who made her what she was. "You're making a great deal of sense, Mr. Sulu," he said finally, "but don't forget that every ship is only as good as the people who man her. At the risk of sounding prejudiced, the Enterprise had the best, but the Excelsior could too, with the right man at the helm... so to speak," he added lamely as he realized what he had said.

Sulu smiled again. "Thank you, sir. That doesn't make the decision any easier, but it's nice to know you understand, despite the bad pun."

"Sorry," said Kirk.

"What about you?" asked Uhura. "Do we continue to call you Captain, or do we go back to Admiral?"

Kirk shook his head. "I don't know. I hope to god the captain part never changes, but at the moment I just don't know. I suppose it depends on what Spock wants to do." He looked at Uhura. "A full Commander doesn't often run communications on a starship."

"A full Commander in communications can do whatever she wants," said Uhura.

"I suppose so," said Kirk with a grin. He felt sorry for anyone who came up against Uhura. As long as he had known her, she had always done things in just the way she wanted to -- no holds barred.

It was late in the evening when Kirk's group finally reached the end of the command cadets curriculum, and the pattern of tests they would go through.

"So, you're sticking with the Kobayashi Maru," said Joe Rodgers with a chuckle. "Guess you're waiting for someone to outdo your solution!"

Kirk grimaced. "That was one of the few arguments I lost with Nogura. I still contend the Kobayashi Maru is a total waste of time, not to mention the cost of putting the simulator back together again after every dumb attempt."

"Oh, I don't know," said Colin Bradshaw. "It shows a cadet's character in a way we wouldn't see otherwise."

"All it shows is how much frustration they can tolerate before they blow," Kirk shot back, then he took a deep breath. "Sorry, I've been through all that with Nogura. The Kobayashi Maru's in; we'll just let it go at that. Anything else?"

"How long will these training cruises on the **Enterprise** take?" asked Rodgers.

"They'll vary," said Kirk. "The cadets will man most of the stations, make the decisions. On the first run, my crew will be backup at all stations, with your people as examiners. After that, we'll start substituting." He looked around. "Anything else?" There was a general shaking of heads. "Well then, gentlemen, I have kept you from home and family long enough for one day. Kick this around for a couple of days; get hold of me if you come across anything you can't live with. The program will start on 2614.2."

After the others had left, Kirk found himself not wanting to go home. McCoy still wasn't back from his 'business trip' with the Surgeon General, and there had been no word from Spock, so obviously the Vulcan had not yet returned from his visit to his home planet. He didn't want to spend the evening by himself, so he decided he would stop off at The Captain's Table on the way home. It had been his favorite bar when he

had been assigned to the Admiralty, and he wanted comfortable familiarity as well as company.

"Hi, Larry."

The bartender turned around at the sound of Kirk's voice. "Jim Kirk!" he said, a welcoming grin crossing his face. "When the hell did you get back in town?"

"Couple of weeks ago. Been pretty busy at Headquarters."

"They still not letting a genuine hero take it easy, huh?"

"Cut it out," said Kirk with a smile. "You got any of that rotgut left?"

Larry looked pained. "Rigellian saseer is not rotgut!" He got out a bottle and wiped off the dust. "You're the last person who drank from this," he said reverently.

"Hell, I hate to think of what the alcohol content must be by now," said Kirk with a laugh. He took the glass Larry handed him. "Business looks good."

Larry glanced around. "A company town -- this is payday. Everybody's getting rid of tensions..."

"And money," said Kirk.

"I'm not complaining," laughed Larry. "You staying around for a while?"

"A few months," said Kirk.

"Don't know why you'd want to go back out there," said Larry. "Men die in space."

"Men die everywhere," said Kirk. "You got any food to go with this powderkeg of a drink? I'd like to be able to weave my way home with some sort of dignity tonight."

"Sure thing," said Larry with a chuckle.

Kirk spent the evening quietly sitting at the end of the bar. From his vantage point he could see the comings and goings of the customers, and he enjoyed the simple pastime of people watching. He saw no one he knew, and if anyone recognized him, no one tried to approach him.

Gradually the bar emptied, until only Kirk and Larry were left. Kirk was finishing his drink as Larry was counting the evening's take.

"Good?" asked Kirk.

"I'll be able to make my aircar payment," said Larry.

"That's very good," came a voice from the doorway, "but I need money for payments of my own, so I'd appreciate it if you'd just collect all those credits and stow them in my little bag here."

Kirk's head snapped around to see two men walking slowly across the floor, both holding old style, but deadly blasters. "Don't move," said the man sharply to Kirk, "or you'll be very, very sorry. Put your hands on the bar and just sit there like a good boy." He looked back at Larry. "You go and lock up like you always do. We don't want to arouse any suspicions that something might be amiss, now do we?"

Larry's face was dark with anger, but he went and locked the front door, then came back to the bar. "This isn't a very smart thing to do," he said.

"Beats working," said the man. He tossed a bag onto the bar. "Fill it with everything you've got." He looked over at Kirk. "You don't look exactly poverty stricken, Fed," he commented, staring at Kirk's uniform. "How's about you adding in a little -- but move slowly." Kirk carefully took out what money he was carrying and tossed it down on the bar. "Very good," said the man.

"Hey, Larry, where do you want me to put the... what the hell?" No one had heard the delivery man come in the back door. Before anyone had a chance to yell a warning, the man by the bar pushed the activator button on his blaster and fired. The delivery man crumpled.

Kirk threw himself backwards into the second man and knocked him flying. He grabbed the bottle of saseer as he went, twisting around to grab the blaster. The man was strong and they crashed through a couple of tables before landing on the floor. Kirk saw the activator being depressed, and swung the bottle as hard as he could. The blaster arched in the air, its beam striking at random, finally accidentally hitting the man who had fired it.

Kirk grabbed the blaster as it hit the floor, and flung himself around. The first man was just reacting to the result of the fight. "Don't, or you die," said Kirk.

With no hesitation, the man swung his blaster so it pointed at Larry. "Then he dies." He looked at Kirk. "I know you Starfleet people. You don't murder in cold blood."

"You're right," said Kirk, his hands rock steady on the blaster, "but you make one move to hurt that man, and I swear you're dead!"

The man's eyes flicked from Larry to Kirk. "How long do you think you can hold that thing on me?"

"As long as you can hold it on him," said Kirk. "If Larry dies, you die, it's that simple." Kirk saw the man hesitate. "We stay here long enough, someone's bound to find us," he added. "Any way you look at it, you lose."

The man's blaster never wavered. "You're bluffing," he said.

Kirk shrugged, his blaster pointing right at the man's heart. "That's for you to decide. Your friend wasn't thinking ahead. He left this set for kill. I'm not about to take my attention away from you long enough to set it at a different mode. You've opened your own grave, friend."

"We can make a deal."

"I'm listening," said Kirk. Keep this man talking, said a voice in the back of Kirk's mind. A desperate man does desperate things. The more he talks, the safer we are.

But he never heard the deal. Suddenly he was being swept by dizzying waves of nausea. Everything swam in front of his eyes and a strong buzzing in his ears grew ever louder. After what seemed forever, the dizziness gradually abated. He blinked hard a couple of times, panic quickly overtaking him. He couldn't see! Vague shadows swirled, but he could not distinguish shapes or movement.

"Jim," came Larry's anguished voice, "you can't let him do that!"

Kirk took a deep breath, wishing he knew what Larry was talking about, wondering what the hell he was going to do himself. He blessed the fact he was already sitting on the floor. Had he been standing, he knew he would have collapsed, just as he had the night before in his office. Hang on, he said to himself, try to find out what's happening.

"You're crazy... " He cleared his throat as his voice came out in a raspy squeak. "You're crazy," he tried again.

"Then here we sit," said the man.

"Here I sit," corrected Kirk. "You're going to stay standing right where you are." He slowly drew his knees up so he could rest his arms and the blaster on them. "Let's see what standing for eight hours or so does for you... " He glanced over in what he hoped was the direction of the bar. "Larry, you might as well sit down and make yourself comfortable. This could be a long night."

"Jim, I'm back!" called Spock as he stepped into the apartment. He was met by silence. He stuck his head into Kirk's room, but there wasn't anyone there. Shrugging, he put his suitcase into his own room, then went into the kitchen to get something to eat. It had been a long trip from Vulcan.

Kirk heard the sound of bottles disintegrating as the lethal beam from the blaster shattered the shelf and part of the wall. "I thought I told you not to move," he said.

"Shit, you practically parted my hair!" swore the man.

"Jim, will you damn well be careful!" said Larry. "If he tries to come at me again, I can take care of myself."

So the man had tried to move toward Larry. Kirk thought he had heard a slight noise as though someone was moving quietly across the floor. It was some sixth sense that had told him where to fire.

"Try that again, Fed, and I burn your friend!"

"Then you die yourself," said Kirk.

"And you come out of this smelling like a rose."

"At least I'll be alive, which is more than you will be." Kirk felt the same weakening dizziness creeping through him and took a firmer grip on the blaster. He had no idea what was wrong, and the little sight he had left was slowly fading. He knew that soon he wouldn't be able to see anything. He wondered if in a short time he would be dead. "Feel like giving up yet?" he asked. Might as well find out before he keeled over. It would be silly to let this man get away if he was willing to surrender before Kirk passed out, or his heart gave out. By the way it was banging, it felt like it was going to explode.

"Think again, Fed," sneered the man.

"Suit yourself," said Kirk. He pushed against the solid security of the wall and concentrated on being able to feel its coolness against his back. He didn't know how much longer he would be able to keep up this charade.

"Hi, Spock," said McCoy as he walked into the apartment. "I brought Jim some salmon." He cringed as the large clock in the hall chimed out the hour. "How do you put up with that clamor?" he asked plaintively.

"One adjusts," said Spock simply. He eyed the fish with distaste. "Are you planning on leaving those things here?"

McCoy grinned. "Don't worry, I'm going to filet them, and I'll get rid of the ends."

"Very well, Doctor, the kitchen is yours."

"Where is Jim, anyway?" asked McCoy as he headed for the other room.

"I have no idea," said Spock. "I arrived home some hours ago, and have not heard from him."

"That's odd," said McCoy. He glanced at the chronometer. "Hell, he can't still be at Starfleet. I don't care how complicated he said those meetings were going to be."

Maybe he stopped somewhere for a drink." He tossed the fish on the counter. "Well, I'd better get this stuff cleaned before I smell you out."

"That would be most gratifying," said Spock.

"Look, I'll split the money with you," said the man. "Just let me get out of here!"

Kirk looked in the direction of the man's voice. "Move back," he said, and there was no mistaking the warning in his own voice.

"I'll kill your friend.... "

"And I'll kill you, so we're back where we started. Now move back to where you where!" Kirk's blaster followed the sounds of the man's footsteps. "Now stay put, or give Larry your weapon. That's the only way you're going to get out of here."

"You're crazy," muttered the man.

"Totally crazy," agreed Larry.

And dying, thought Kirk. He said nothing out loud, only took a firmer grip on the blaster.

A hand shook McCoy awake. "If I had known you were spending the night, I would have offered you a bed, Doctor," said Spock.

McCoy looked embarrassed. "I hadn't planned on staying. I wanted to talk to Jim, so hung around for a while. Guess that fishing trip must have tired me out more than I thought. Is Jim up yet?"

"He didn't come home."

"What?" McCoy was instantly on his feet.

"I have checked with Fleet Headquarters. He's not there, and no one has seen him."

McCoy frowned. "It's unlike him not to let somebody know where he is. Maybe he went home with someone...." He broke off as he noticed Spock's expression. "Well, maybe not," he muttered. He watched Spock move to the front hall. "Where are you going?"

"To look for him."

"Where?"

Spock turned to face McCoy. "Most Humans have a pattern to their movements, Doctor. There are several places that Jim may have visited last night. I plan to go to each of them to find out if he was there."

"I'll come with you," said McCoy.

Spock looked at him for a minute, then nodded. "Very well. I shall leave a message for Jim to contact Starfleet should he get back before we do." He moved toward the communications console. "Perhaps you would like to take a moment to make yourself presentable to the outside world," he said without looking around.

"Why you...." sputtered McCoy, then he stormed toward the bathroom. He'd probably remind me to wash behind my ears if he thought he could get away with it!

"Okay, Fed, I'm calling your bluff. I'm getting out of here."

Kirk raised his blaster. "I wouldn't recommend trying it."

"I've had enough. If you're going to kill me, then kill me!" He started edging toward the back of the room as Kirk groped his way to his feet.

"Jim," said Larry. "Let him go!"

"No," said Kirk, "he's not going to let us live, Larry. The proof is lying at your feet. We saw him kill." He cautiously moved forward. "Don't do it," he warned the man who was backing away, his blaster still aimed at Larry. "You'll be dead if you reach for that door."

"You'll have to prove it to me."

"That's your choice," said Kirk. He moved forward step by step, praying he wouldn't fall over anything, praying that the man would keep making as much noise as he was so that he could follow him, and not let him know the bad shape he was in -- the fact that he couldn't see.

"Jim, for pete's sake, be careful!" said Larry.

"Don't worry, Larry, he's a coward. If you die, he dies, and he's not about to give up his own life."

"Don't be so sure, Fed. What if I shoot you instead of him?"

I'm dead anyway, thought Kirk. Anything would be better than this. "Go ahead, try," he said aloud. "My blaster is aimed right at you..." God, please let it be aimed

correctly! "... You have to move yours from Larry in order to shoot me. You'll be dead before you can press the activator."

"Damn you!" spat the man. "I'm going to..."

There was a crash, followed by a yell from Larry. Kirk leapt forward. "Larry, are you all right?" He collided with a body, then arms were wrapped around him. He struggled to get free as he felt the blaster being wrenched away from him.

"Jim, hey, watch who you're trying to kill!"

Kirk froze. "Bones?" he asked.

McCoy stared at him. "Well, I know we don't often end up in each other's arms, but surely I wasn't gone so long that you don't recognize me?"

Another hand touched Kirk's shoulder. "Jim, are you all right?"

Tears came to Kirk's eyes at the sound of Spock's voice. "No, I'm not," he said, his voice breaking. "I've been blind for hours, and I think I'm dying..."

"Jesus!" said Larry.

McCoy shot a quick look at Spock and saw the same shock registered in the Vulcan's eyes that he knew was on his own face. He quickly turned his attention back to Kirk. "I'll call a medicar from Starfleet," he said, his voice sounding a lot calmer than he felt. He deftly handed Kirk over to Spock's outstretched arms. "Be right back," he said, disappearing out the door.

Kirk almost collapsed before Spock got his arms around him. "Hold on, Jim" Spock said softly as he went down onto the floor with Kirk. Kirk groped for Spock's hand, and his painful grip spoke of fear rather than strength.

Larry hesitantly poked at the unconscious body of the man who had held them prisoner for the long, tension-filled hours. "Is he dead?" he asked, looking at Spock.

"Negative," Spock said briefly, his eyes never leaving Kirk's face.

"It's a handy trick Spock has," Kirk said, a tiny smile touching his mouth. A stab of fear went through Spock -- Kirk's normally expressive eyes were blurred and unfocused. "Saves wear and tear -- and a lot of arguing."

"Yeah, I can see that," Larry said dubiously.

Spock felt a tremor go through Kirk. He looked over at Larry. "Perhaps you could wait outside so the medical team will know where to come," he suggested.

"Good idea," Larry said, relieved at finally having something to do.

"Thanks," Kirk said gratefully as he heard the door shut behind Larry's departing figure. "God, Spock, what's wrong with me?"

Spock hugged Kirk closer, understanding his growing panic now that he could finally let himself go. "I am certain that McCoy will find the cause," he said with more confidence than he was feeling.

"I only hope there's a cure," Kirk replied softly, so softly that Spock wondered if he had really heard it, or had felt Kirk's thoughts.

Suddenly the room was full of people. "Over here," McCoy was saying to two men who were pushing a gurney.

Spock felt Kirk stiffen as strangers reached out and took hold of him. He slowly stood, helping Kirk to his feet at the same time. "I believe the Admiral is able to walk," he said. The words were polite but the look in the dark eyes caused the men to fall back, then look at McCoy.

"The medicar's waiting," McCoy said, understanding Kirk's need for reassurance, his need for the Vulcan to remain at his side.

Spock nodded. He slipped an arm around Kirk's waist and gently guided him outside.

The ride to Starfleet was accomplished in silence. Kirk lay on the gurney, still tightly holding onto Spock's hand. McCoy kept a continuous monitoring, still having no idea what he was looking for. The medicar personnel were slightly in awe of their passengers, and left them to their own thoughts.

The emergency room was forewarned and ready when they arrived. Before the doors were fully closed, Kirk had been stripped and life support systems hooked up, ready to be turned on if they became necessary. McCoy's many orders were instantly and efficiently obeyed.

"Any pain, Jim?"

"A little," Kirk admitted.

"Where?"

"My head. Mostly feel weak, dizzy, nauseated, out of breath.... "

"2 mg mantigraine," McCoy said to someone behind him. "Jim," he continued gently, "you said you couldn't see... "

Spock felt Kirk's hand tighten again and covered it with his own. Kirk had again refused to let go of Spock when they had brought him into the emergency room.

"... do you mean not well, or not at all?"

"Vague shapes... shapes that dissolve into one another," Kirk said. ""It's not completely black, more of a cloudy shade of grey."

"How many fingers?" McCoy asked, holding up his hand.

Kirk shook his head. "No good," he said.

"Okay, don't worry. We'll get it figured out." He looked across the room. "Do we have all the immediate testing done?" he asked.

"I believe so, Doctor," came the answer.

McCoy put his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Jim, you've been under severe tension for a lot of hours and my evaluation is complete exhaustion, among other things. I'm going to give you something to help you sleep while I complete these tests.

"Bones?" Kirk said, not wanting to ask, not wanting to know.

"I don't know," McCoy said softly, "but I'm going to find out, and I promise you'll be the first to know." He pressed a hypo against Kirk's shoulder. "When you wake up, you'll be in intensive care. It'll be noisy and, I hope, very bright."

"I'll look forward to it," came Kirk's sleepy reply, trying to sound cheerful for McCoy's benefit.

Gradually the fingers around Spock's hand loosened as Kirk lost consciousness. "Orderly, transfer Admiral Kirk to ICU 3," McCoy said. "I want to know the instant he's awake. I'll be in the bio lab."

"Yes, sir," said the man, moving to the head of Kirk's bed.

"Let him go, Spock," McCoy said gently. "I gave him a pretty hefty dose. He'll be out for hours." He picked up the various samples he had taken from Kirk, then looked back at the Vulcan. "Do me a favor? Someone has got to tell Nogura, and I honestly don't have time, not if I'm going to have an answer for Jim when he wakes up."

Spock nodded slowly. "I shall talk with him, Doctor."

"Good. I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything."

Kirk gradually woke out of a deep and dreamless sleep. His body felt limp and heavy, as though someone had attached lead weights all through it. He was aware of people around him, quiet talk in the distance, and wondered where he was. Then he suddenly remembered -- he was blind, and in a hospital. He also remembered McCoy's last words to him. You'll wake up in intensive care. It'll be noisy and, I hope, very bright.

He didn't dare open his eyes to find out if he could see. He lay silent, listening to the voices and the whirrs and bleeps from the various pieces of equipment.

"How's it going, Jim-boy?" came a familiar drawl from beside him.

"Bones?" Even to his own ears, Kirk's voice sounded weak and somewhat slurred.

"One and the same. Told you I'd be here when you woke up, didn't I?"

Kirk nodded. "Didn't realize you were."

"That's because you didn't look," McCoy chided gently.

"Afraid to," Kirk mumbled.

"Take a peek anyway," McCoy said, "but slowly. When I said it was going to be bright in here, I wasn't kidding."

Kirk felt his heart start to race, but he carefully looked out from under his eyelashes.

"Well?"

Kirk was silent for a minute. "You've never looked more beautiful," he said finally. Closing his eyes, he reached up and took hold of McCoy's arm. The doctor could feel the trembling of Kirk's body through his hand. "Thanks, Bones," he said softly.

"You're more than welcome," McCoy answered, his voice no steadier than Kirk's hand. "Now, it's time to go back to sleep. We've just got one problem solved; it's up to you to do the rest." He pressed the hypo against Kirk's arm and watched as the arrows rose and fell on the monitor above Kirk's bed. "You've got one hell of a time in front of you Jim," he said softly to the sleeping figure, "and I wish to god there was something more I could do, seeing that I helped cause the whole mess in the first place."

"Doctor..." a nurse's voice interrupted McCoy's thoughts. "There appears to be some problem with an unauthorized visitor. He insists that you gave him permission to come into ICU."

"Oh, thank you, nurse, I'll be right with you." After the woman had left, McCoy briefly laid a hand along the side of Kirk's face. "You'll make it," he said softly. "With Spock and me beside you, there's no way you won't."

McCoy quietly entered the intensive care cubicle, smiling at the sight of an angry nurse facing off against an equally stubborn Vulcan. "It's all right, Nurse, he can come in." She looked at McCoy, glared back at Spock, then left.

"What have you discovered?" asked Spock, as they both walked back to Kirk's bedside.

"He had an allergic reaction to Retinax Five."

Spock stared at him. "I've never heard of such a thing," he said finally.

"Neither had I," said McCoy. "It was his impaired vision that led me to suspect that Retinax Five might be the cause. Since he had just undergone a physical that said

he was in top shape." McCoy sighed. "The trouble is that because of the rarity of such an allergic reaction, there is precious little information about how to treat it."

"Will he be all right?"

McCoy hesitated. "In time," he said finally.

"What do you mean, in time?" demanded Spock.

"Well, Dyprex is the recommended drug to reduce the inflammation of the optic nerve in order to restore normal eyesight, but..." His voice trailed off.

"But?" prompted Spock.

McCoy drew in a deep breath. "As you know, Retinax Five is injected every six months. There is nothing we can give him to counteract the rest of the negative effects it will have, other than supportive therapy. It's going to have to wear out of his system."

"Six months of this?" asked Spock, gesturing to the silent form surrounded by monitoring equipment.

"Not to this extreme, I hope," said McCoy, "but dizziness, nausea, occasional weakness — yes. Most of the time he'll feel fine. This kind of attack will be an occasional thing."

"But it won't leave lasting damage..."

"No," said McCoy. "Once the Retinax Five is out of his system, he'll be back to his normal, cheerful self." He looked down at Kirk. "Thank heaven, if this had to happen, that it did at a time when we're on Earth. He can keep working and be as effective as always. As long as he's aware of his condition, he'll know when he's starting to have problems."

Spock nodded. "Running the new cadet program will give him little time to think of anything else."

"Come on, Spock, he's going to be asleep for hours. We'd better catch some sleep ourselves. He should be coming home tomorrow, barring any unforeseen setbacks."

They walked down the corridor in silence, then McCoy glanced over at Spock. "Has Nogura offered you a captaincy yet?"

Spock nodded. "Just now, when I told him about what happened to Jim."

"And?"

"I accepted," said Spock.

"You accepted?" echoed McCoy, not sure he had heard correctly.

"It fits in with the cadet program," said Spock. "Jim is coordinating all the sections; he won't have time to do the command training by himself, we have already

discussed that. Young trainees are very impressionable, Doctor. It will be easier for them to accept me as a captain than as a Commander." He stopped and turned to McCoy. "I am a captain in charge of the command training of Starfleet cadets. I am not a starship captain."

McCoy nodded, but said nothing. He should have known that Spock would have a logical reason for accepting promotion. In Spock's mind, Kirk was still his Captain, and always would be.

"I need a vacation!" said Kirk as he flopped into a chair in front of the fire.

McCoy looked up with a smile. "You need to get away from Earth, get back out into that black void that you love so much."

"It's not the time," said Kirk quietly, the smile fading from his face.

McCoy crooked an eyebrow at him. "You gave this little experiment of yours six months. By my count, those months are up and more..."

"That was before I started falling flat on my face," said Kirk.

"Hey, you can't blame anything on that anymore! Your system's clear of Retinax Five. You're just as sound as you ever were."

Kirk stared into the fire. "It's going to take me time to believe that, Bones. It's been a long haul, never knowing if and when I was going to collapse... having to depend on others to do things I should have been doing...."

"Bull!" said McCoy. "It finally forced you to delegate authority, and look at how your people came through. They're a good bunch, Jim. Give them responsibility and they take off."

"I know," said Kirk with a lopsided grin, "that's why I told them that after the cadet testing and **Enterprise** run next week, they should all take Nogura's promotion offers."

"You what?"

Kirk looked at him. "You think I did the wrong thing?"

"Well, no," spluttered McCoy, "but who's going to crew the **Enterprise**?"

"Spock's in charge of her now," said Kirk shortly.

"You know that not true," said McCoy sharply. "There's no way he would ever take the **Enterprise** from you. He's waiting... we're all waiting for you to take her out again."

Kirk looked up at him, then got up and walked across the room. "I'm afraid you're going to have a long wait," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. He stood looking out of the window for a few minutes, then moved over to the bar. "Would you like a drink, Doctor?" he asked in a more normal voice.

"Brandy," McCoy answered, his eyes following Kirk's movements, a hint of worry nagging at the back of his mind. Coping with his negative reaction to Retinax Five over the past six months had changed Kirk, made him far more aware of his frailties than his strengths, something that had never happened to him before. Spock's arrival distracted him before he could say anything to Kirk.

Kirk seemed grateful for the diversion. "Glad you're back, Spock. Did you get the test set up?"

"I personally inserted the program," said Spock. "I doubt if anyone will produce a solution satisfying to himself."

"Better not let this devious man get close to it," said McCoy with a chuckle. "You know how he always manages to tie computers into knots."

"Well, talking about computers and knots, I've got to grade some command cadets' test papers," said Kirk. He got to his feet. "Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen. I may be down at Fleet Headquarters all night."

Spock and McCoy sat in silence for a while after Kirk had left. "It's his birthday tomorrow," said McCoy eventually.

"I trust you haven't arranged a gaudy gathering," said Spock.

"You know me better than that," said McCoy. "Spock, has Jim said anything recently about ending his work here?"

Spock stared at the fire for a few moments. "Negative," he said finally.

McCoy glanced over at the Vulcan's unconscious use of service language. "It's time he took the *Enterprise* back and got out of here."

Spock nodded, his eyes still on the fire. "It is time, Doctor, but something must show him he is still able to command."

"So he really does feel he's lost it," said McCoy, his heart sinking.

Spock finally looked at him. "He knows he is capable, Doctor, but he does not know if he is able, that is the difference. For the past six months he has continually been faced with a condition that has constantly pulled him down, aged him, exhausted him with its relentless physical attacks. Jim is stronger than most, but even he is not that strong."

"Spock, you've got to talk with him!"

A Vulcan eyebrow rose. "He hears only what he wants to hear, Doctor. Any reassurance on my part would only cause him to suspect I was mouthing empty platitudes. He would not believe me."



"Well, damn it, I'm going to try. A good kick in the butt is what he needs."

"I sincerely hope your kick works," said Spock. "Perhaps that, along with the training cruise on the **Enterprise**, will help make him realize the folly of permanently giving up his command."

"Do you mean he already has?" asked McCoy in alarm.

"He has talked to Admiral Morrow. He did not tell me the specifics but, yes, I think that is essentially what he did."

"Damn, but he's a pig-headed wonder!" said McCoy. He glanced at the chronometer. "Well, sitting here worrying about him isn't going to do much good. I'd better get home. If I'm going to get blown to bits in the simulator tomorrow, which I think I will even with that genius of a protege of yours in command, I'd better get some sleep. See you in the morning, Spock."

"Goodnight, Doctor."

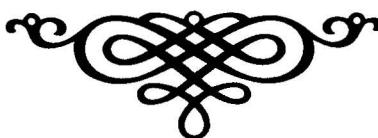
After McCoy had left, Spock sat for a while longer staring at the fire, a habit he had picked up from Kirk and the quiet evenings they had shared in this very apartment. Finally he reached out and took a book out the bag he had carried in with him. The book was a rare old first edition Dickens' novel, and Spock's answer to Kirk's present uncertainties.

He was correct when he told McCoy that Kirk wouldn't listen to him. The Human could be stubborn beyond belief when he had his mind made up about something, regardless of whether he was right or wrong. However, Spock's argument was in this book -- his argument and Kirk's answer.

He opened the book, savoring the slight musty smell of its paper, almost parchment-like in quality, and appreciating the beautiful print that adorned its pages. He turned to the first chapter and read the opening line, although he was already familiar with the entire book, as he was with all of Dickens' classics.

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times..."

Spock stared at the print for a minute, then closed the book and returned his attention to the fire. It had been the best of times. It would only be the worst of times if Kirk didn't return to command the **Enterprise**. Somehow, Spock knew he would find a way to make sure that Kirk did, and when he did, Kirk would discover the truth -- the truth that he was young in a way that few men were ever privileged to be young.



like tattered cloth

by: CarolMel Ambassador

Like the frayed edges of a cloth
my nerves lie exposed to skeptical scrutiny.
My confident and commanding personage
scoffed at the mockery
of fate and the 'no-win scenario'.
For experience and the skill of bluff
have always freed us from their jaws.
But that is past now,
as I feel their teeth sink deeply
into my most tender flesh:
the love of a friend.
You were the thread, Spock
that held this untailored cloth
in the order of an always-efficient Captain.
You set the order
that provided the image we both wore:
that of command, mixed with
adventuring among the stars.
We created a tapestry --
your logic complementing my command,
our combined colors,
which by their very difference
amplified each other.

Now my heart and soul are unruly.
I have learned from painful reality
that the true source of my love of Enterprise
was something more than the joy of a starship.
It was a friendship which you called T'hy'la,
and I, too, feel it was something
which even the term 'brother'
is hard pressed to fairly define.
Only your logical tailoring
gave this cloth real purpose.
My soul is now a void like this ship.
I am a cloth now subject
to the winds of sorrow,

fraying more and more, due to the loss.
If I could provide the tool
that would mend this severing
and restore the comradeship,
I would do it,
mending carefully the tattered edges.
I would employ the techniques
that had originally created our brotherhood.
First a gentle hand of friendship
when I felt you were worth
the investment of my time.
You answered with intelligence and devotion,
when you felt I was worthy.
So, until I can find that tool,
to combine our unbeatable souls,
all that remains at present
is the void within this Starship.

The remedy was so close
that it was obscured from my view,
hidden in the erratic behavior of McCoy.
But I shall take the tool firmly in hand
and use it in the tailoring.
The materials in the mending
are expensive this round:
the loss of a career
and the death of a son.
But by the combined talents
of your friends, as well as mine,
we shall repair the damage done.
I search now for your katra
to unite it with your body,
and once you are whole
so shall be my own soul —
a friend and brother restored.
Again will come order
as my retailored life gains new meaning.
This tapestry will have new purpose
having gained new dimensions
by the reunion.
A cloth partially worn to thinness
but comfortable by use,
like a well-kept instrument
tuned for its purpose.
I will provide for you the tailoring
when you most need it;
pulling together the threads
of our past harmony.
Only when you answer by recognition
do I then fully realize
that our friendship —
our tapestry —
is again restored and whole.

THE DOCTOR

by: D.A. Martin

art: Gennie Summers

A worn face, lived in and comfortable,
Handsome in its own way
Especially when you smile,
And a twinkle comes to warm
Tired blue eyes.

Cynicism a mask to shield
The aching, humanitarian soul,
The loves lost or never known.
A child, well grown,
Known only as an innocent babe.

Caught between an ageless Vulcan
And bright-eyed youthful Human,
"I'm too old for this." a familiar complaint
I agree. You are. But then
You were born that way.

Your gentle soul assumed at birth
All the burdens of sorrowing man.
Offered a few bright moments
To hold back death's eternal rest.
Enough to keep you fighting on.

You're no star-strutting child.
Very few less military than you,
Unlike the wandering lives you guard.
Bright hope, love gone to dust,
The uniform an escape, you ran.

What have you found now you're out here?
Contentment? Moments of peace, at least?
A small child who carries your name,
A Gem in a world solid black,
And two friends who see the true man.

Memories carried that show in your face,
Skills learned, they show in your hands,
A lifetime lived to the service of man,
Common sense, a glimpse of genius,
In you man's not done so bad.





SMALL



FANS

by: Jennifer Weston
art: Mary Mills

Captain James Kirk leaned on the woven-wood railing, stared past the curlgrass lawn to the tall forest, spread like a thick green blanket as far as the eye could see. Hence Prabodh Pankhi's description of this place as his "cabin in the woods."

Some woods. Kirk glanced behind him. And some cabin! It was actually a three-story blonde-lumber bungalow, very comfortably appointed right down to the AutoBar here on the sundeck. Leonard McCoy was inspecting that apparatus now, and punching up their orders. Spock, further to the side, was examining the streaked-ivory blooms of a flat-topped potted bush. Allison-Sunita, Pankhi's twelve-year-old granddaughter, sat splay-legged in the bush's shade, sorting her collection of souvenirs gathered in the forest. An Earth-like blue sky and the notoriously fragrant Alphanian breezes completed the idyllic scene.

The Captain turned to the distinguished looking gentleman standing beside him. "Very pleasant set-up you've got here, Admiral."

The greying Hindu smiled. "I'm a civilian now, Jim. You can call me Prab."

"If you like... Prab." Kirk chuckled, recalling his first encounter with First Officer Pankhi of the *Farragut*. Back then, the notion of his ever being on a first name basis with this mahogany-faced taskmaster would have seemed a wild fantasy. But time had a way of mellowing relationships. When the *Enterprise* pulled into the Alpha Centuri base for repairs and brief shore leave, and Bones mentioned his intention to acquire a vellnu-vine root for one of his research projects, Kirk had immediately thought of contacting his former superior. Retired Admiral Pankhi lived on a wooded estate on Alpha Five's southern continent, where the vine occurred in greatest numbers. Pankhi had not only confirmed the species grew on his property and given McCoy permission to take one, but had invited Kirk "and as many of your officers as you'd like to bring" to spend their shore leave at his "cabin." Most of Jim's command crew had already made other plans, but Spock had come, lured by the chance to see an unspoiled Alpha Five rainforest. Though at the moment, he was giving more attention to the rows of feathers, seedpods, and discarded eggshells Allison was spreading on the deck. The girl, a gangly tomboy with thick black braids and dark eyes, wore running shorts, a light jacket and freckles which barely showed through her dusky-red complexion. Noting Spock's interest, she bent a leg to allow him a better view of her collection.

McCoy crossed the deck with their drinks on a tray -- brandy for Kirk, mint julep for himself, a potent lime-juice concoction for their host and non-alcoholic versions of it for Spock and Allison. The doctor smiled mischievously as he handed Prabodh his order. "Jim here tells me you were his commanding officer on his first deep-space tour of duty. I'll bet you have a few stories you could tell about his days as a lowly Lieutenant."

"That I have!" The ex-Admiral beamed, for he was always glad to reminisce about his shipboard years. But he glanced at the sun's position, and added, "I'm afraid we haven't time for it just now. The outcrop where the vines grow is several kilometers away. We'll have to start for it soon if we want to get back before dark."

Spock, seeing the disappointment of McCoy and Pankhi, and failing to notice Kirk's total lack of it, ventured; "There is no need for all of us to make the excursion. If you would give me the directions there, I shall be quite willing to fetch the root myself, Admiral."

Bones and Pankhi cheered up visibly "Your offer is accepted, and thank you very much, Commander." Prab looked to his granddaughter. "Allie, you know the way to Towers Outcrop better than I do -- would you mind showing Mr. Spock the way there?"

The youngster smiled broadly. "Sure, Grand-Bap!" She gulped down the rest of her lime drink, scooped her scattered treasures back into their storage tube, and bounded down onto the lawn.

"Just a moment!" Pankhi's tone was suddenly stern as he pointed to the girl's bare brown feet. "Go put your boots on, young lady."

"Oh, all right!" She trudged indoors, letting the door bang behind her. To his guest's inquiring looks Prab explained, "There's a fair number of snakes living around that outcrop. None of them really dangerous, but her mother would never forgive me if I sent her home with a scarred ankle."

A minute later Allie came rushing back out, wearing high grey-leather hiking shoes. "Ready now."

McCoy handed the equipment to Spock -- preset tricorder, digging laser and carrying bag. Spock slung them in place at his belt, and followed the girl across the lawn and into the forest. The three remaining men settled into the deck chairs, Prab crossing his legs comfortably, contemplating his swirling glass.

"Let me see... may as well start with the day Lieutenant Kirk first came aboard the Farragut, all bright-eyed and determined to make something of himself. Our resident practical joker, Sub-engineer Kunj, spotted him right off as one of those eager-to-please newcomers who'd jump to obey any order without question..."

Bones was literally on the edge of his seat with anticipation. Kirk sighed within, and took a preparatory swallow of his brandy.

The high blue-green forest canopy was alive with calls and rustling. Alpha Five's heavy rains had just ended; courtship and nesting activities were in full swing. Allie

frequently darted from the scarce-seen trail to retrieve feathers dropped by the preoccupied avians. Scuttlings and glimpses of furred forms among the trunks and woody vines denoted mammalian residents, occasional leafy rustlings revealed reptiles, smaller creatures reminiscent of beetles and winged insects crawled in the branches or flew between the trees. Allison named as many of them as she knew. This was only a small section of the great rainforest covering most of Alpha Five's southern continent — one particularly attractive to colonists since only half of its year was truly humid, and none of the insect species had (yet) developed any taste for preying on humanoids. It was most fortunate that the planetary government, determined not to repeat mistakes of the past, was careful to lease land only to conservation-minded individuals. It was a great regret to Spock that he would have so little time to experience it on this visit.

A little over a kilometer in, the forest gave way to an open patch of herbaceous plants and low brush. From the hardness of the walking surface Spock deduced this as a 'caprock meadow', where slabstone just below the soil prevented any trees from taking root. Gazing over the space, he noticed many bright-hued wings flitting among the wild-flowers. Alphanian butterflies, named for the terrestrial organisms they so resembled in appearance and behavior, as he recalled from his study tapes. His young guide followed the direction of his stare. Abruptly she asked, "Do you like animals, Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan hesitated. 'Like' was a term laden with emotional connotations, but he decided it would not do to make such an answer to a human child. "As a scientist I find animals, and indeed all living organisms, endlessly fascinating. Study of their functions, behaviors, and evolutionary origins can be a source of both important knowledge and great personal satisfaction."

"I know about that, but I mean, do you like having them around? Is being near them, seeing them, something you can enjoy?"

"If you are inquiring about my esthetic preferences, I should mention very many of my people consider that a personal matter. I will, for myself, admit to deriving definite positive stimuli from the experience of watching living things in their natural states. Or from simply knowing they are allowed such existence, somewhere."

"Well, I like them," Allison pronounced. "I visit Grand-Bap every chance I get, mostly just so I can hike around this forest and find out all I can about the animals. Zoology is my best subject in school; my grades are in the top percentile! I'm going to become a pan-zoologist and enter Starfleet some day, so I can be on one of the primary-exploration ships and find a whole planet ecosystem nobody's ever seen before. Then, I'll apply for a research-colony permit and spend my whole life studying it, like Yoshiko Miyagi did here." She executed a spinning dance step with arms outstretched, to take in the whole southern continent.

Spock was amused, but nodded approvingly. "A most laudable ambition, and feasible, if you maintain your present academic excellence. However, you may have to include several years aboard a secondary-exploration vessel in your plans. Recent Academy graduates are generally assigned to those, since their casualty rates are significantly lower."

"Grand-Bap told me that, too," the girl responded, with all of youth's impatience with adult caution. "They'd just better not try to keep me there too long, cause I don't want to spend my whole life in places other people have been trampling on before me. Sooner or later, I want to be the one who gets somewhere first!"

And, as if matching action to words, Allie sprinted the remaining distance across the meadow, vanishing beneath the forest eaves. Spock had to lengthen his stride to catch up with her.

Soon the substrate changed again, getting steeper and stonier. As the trees thinned out, the two hikers could see the great burnt-orange cylinders of Towers Outcrop — actually the eroded remnants of an ancient volcano's core. Eventually they reached its base, ringed with tumbled rock piles, and festooned with branching purple-black vines. Allison braced her boot against a sizable specimen. "This was what you wanted?"

Spock was already scanning. "It's the correct species, but this individual is past the optimum age. Only a specimen of under five standard years will have the concentration of alkaloids needed for Dr. McCoy's medicinal research. A vine with a base diameter of fifteen centimeters or so should be about right."

All the vellnu-vines within view were far too large. Allie suggested they could save searching time if they separated, each circling a different side of the outcrop, and whoever found a good specimen first would give a yell.

Young vines proved to be quite uncommon; Spock had skirted nearly all his half of the great rock before he found one to meet his qualifications. He had lifted his digging laser and was about to call Allison, when he heard a distinct rasping noise, close to the ground beyond the next stone. Cautiously curious, he stepped around the obstruction and immediately saw a long, slim snake, stretched out among the talus piles. The creature was deliberately rubbing its spear-shaped head against a rough stone edge. Spock watched, and as translucent tan flaking came loose from its snout, he realized the snake was shedding its skin. He also recognized, from the intricate spring-green and golden markings and creamy underside, that it was a 'reed-basket snake' — moderately venomous, but supposedly unaggressive in disposition.

Running steps sounded behind the next spur — Allison, completing her own circuit. As she came in view Spock motioned for her to keep clear of the rock tumble. Seeing why, she looked apprehensively, not at the snake, but at the Vulcan, and hurried over to him. "Mr. Spock, we don't belong here and the snake does; we haven't any right to kill it."

Realizing she had misinterpreted his motive for brandishing the laser, he deliberately lowered it. "I had no intention of doing so, Ms. Pankhi."

She looked much happier. "There's so many people around — men especially — who think any snake they see ought to be killed!"

"An irrationally fearful attitude, probably born of ignorance." His deep gaze returned to the animal, now pushing forward to lift the dead covering clear from its forehead. "If the information I perused is correct, this species is not prone to bite unless severely provoked. We may therefore retain our safety by the simple expenditure of keeping our distance."

Allie looked up at him, and smiled, as though just coming to a decision. "I guess you do like animals."

"One could put it that way," Spock conceded. They watched as the slender reptile gradually wiggled free of its old epidermis, leaving it stretched limply among the

tallus. The new skin glittered with newborn colors as it flowed away toward the forest, finally disappearing among the leaves. Spock lifted the cast-off sheath, coiled it into a disk and handed it to the girl. "For your natural history collection."

"Thanks." She gratefully pocketed the souvenir. Then they backtracked to the young vine and dug up its root -- a bulky salmon tuber shaped like a cluster of fists. As Spock deposited it in his collecting bag and fastened it at his waist, Allison fished something from her own jacket. It was a small glass phial two-thirds full of oily maroon fluid.

"Here! I brought something else out when I went to get my boots. It's a liquid that'll change the way you smell; put some on and we'll see a lot more animals on our way home." She uncapped the container and handed it to him. He sniffed curiously -- it had an intriguing fruity-smoky odor. He rubbed a bit between his fingers, and decided it seemed harmless enough. "The pH is eight -- inert," Allie assured.

"May I know what this substance is?"

"Extract from seeds of the looemba bush -- that's the one you were looking at on the sundeck. It puts out pods every autumn and I collect 'em."

Convinced the liquid was innocuous, and interested in testing the girl's claim, Spock asked. "How does one use it?"

"Just splash it on you. Against bare skin works the best -- evaporates faster. The more you use the more effective it'll be."

Spock rubbed a few drops into the backs of his hands, and, after a moment's consideration, applied more to the sides of his neck. Allison watched with just a twinge of conscience, which she quickly rationalized away. She hadn't lied; they would see more animals this way. She wasn't to blame, just because Spock had not asked her to specify what kind of animals.

"... and I told him, 'Lieutenant Kirk, I don't know about that training ship of yours, but on the Farragut all food processors unload at the front!'"

The doctor chortled again, slapping his thigh, while Kirk longingly eyed the bottom of his empty brandy-sniffer. It was about time, he decided, to remind Bones he possessed his own armory of McCoy anecdotes.

"That's enough about our Starfleet days, Prab," he interjected politely. "How about a more recent story... like the last shore leave Bones and I took at Rigel 12?"

The Chief Surgeon nearly choked on his last guffaw, whirled on his Captain. "Jim, you promised you'd never tell!"

"So I did. And one good promise deserves another, wouldn't you say?"

The blue eyes narrowed. "Are you implying you don't want me repeating any of this stuff aboard the Enterprise?"

"That's exactly what I'm implying... Doctor Nine-out-of-Ten."

Pankhi was looking more intrigued by the moment. "All right, Jim. I won't. Swear on my mother's grave," Bones said hastily.

"Isn't your mother still alive?"

"On her future grave, then! Jim, what you're threatening is cruel and unusual..."

McCoy was interrupted by a loud "We're back!" It was Allison's cheery call, as she came flying over the lawn and up the sundeck steps. Panting, she knelt beside her collection tube and pulled a papery coil from her pocket. "I got a new snakeskin, from a reed-basket snake! Even got to see him shedding it, at the base of the Towers Outcrop. And Mr. Spock found just the kind of vellnu-root he needed, though we had to look for it for a while. That was when we found..."

"Where is Spock?" McCoy finally managed to get a word in edgewise.

Now occupied with her boot fastenings, the girl jerked a thumb in the direction of the trail. "He's coming. Walking kind of slow, is all."

"He's not hurt, is he?"

Allie flashed a sly smile. "No, not hurt. Just a little bit... encumbered."

The Enterprise officers exchanged a concerned glance. Assailed by visions of Spock limping painfully on a snakebitten foot, Kirk rose and started for the stairs. But his panic died, as he spied a blue tunic, coming into view among the trees.

At least, part of it was blue.

Kirk blinked, leaning over the rail again. "What the hey... ?"

Bones, too, stood and stared as Spock stepped onto the grass. From the waist up, he seemed to be festooned with dozens of moving bits of brightly colored rag. And plenty more, floating in the air around him.

"Allison-Sunita!"

Kirk jumped within, at the Taskmaster's bark of old. But Allie, no junior officer, just shrugged disarmingly. "It's okay, Grand-Bap. I made sure first, that he wouldn't really mind."

"What's happened?" The Captain demanded of them both.

Pankhi really had mellowed with age; all he could do was fling up his hands with exasperation. "My son's daughter over there, has somehow gotten your First Officer scented with Looemba-seed oil. A couple years back she found out, by accident, it puts out a smell that every butterfly species in this region finds irresistible. Since then, she's been harvesting all the seeds from my bush and using them for nature studies. And for practical jokes."

Spock crossed the lawn at less than his usual speed, as was now apparent, to avoid damaging his fragile passengers. Kirk was amazed at the variety of their shades

and patterns; pale green edged with bright yellow, hammered-copper plates on black velvet, lavender stretching into long tapering tails, iridescent turquoise, sulphur with amethyst veinwork...

The Vulcan came beside the sundeck and, with full dignity, lifted the collecting bag to McCoy. "Your vellnu-root, as ordered."

The bag came with a broad-winged scarlet creature attached, but immediately after being handed to Bones, it flitted back to Spock, landing just above his uniform insignia. The Chief Surgeon assumed his best Georgian accent. "Why, Mr. Spock, if you don't put me in mind of one of those puirty floats I've seen at the Atlanta Magnolia-Blossom Festival parade!"

The First Officer's brow quirked, momentarily dislodging a deep-sapphire specimen perched there. But it was Allison he addressed. "Tell me, Ms. Pankhi, do you play this trick on every person you guide into the forest?"

"Only the ones who I'm sure won't hurt the butterflies."

McCoy cooed, "Oh, how sweet! I never knew you were the type, Spock."

"Really, Doctor? Then did you imagine Surak's reverence-for-life doctrine applied only to the higher life forms?" As he spoke, a new arrival landed on the side of Spock's head but, failing to find purchase there, slid til it found a foothold on his eartip. Feeling the tickle, Spock reached to take the creature on his finger, bringing it forward. It had the most pristine coloration yet; transparent as veined glass, with large shining silver and aquamarine blotches along the edges. As he stared at it, McCoy's smug expression changed into something like envy.

"I would be most appreciative if you could provide me with another sample of that seed extract, Ms. Pankhi. It would be a most intriguing study, to determine the physiological basis of its attractant properties."

"Sure thing -- I've got plenty more." Boots in hand, Allie raced back into the house. Their host's relief was evident, but Bones rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Oh, no! You mean we're going to spend the rest of this shore leave with you hanging around, up to your... ears, in crawling insects?"

"And what better place for it, Doctor? This is the Pankhi estate."

To Kirk's surprise, the former Admiral looked as disconcerted as Jim had ever seen him. "What'd he mean by that, Prab?"

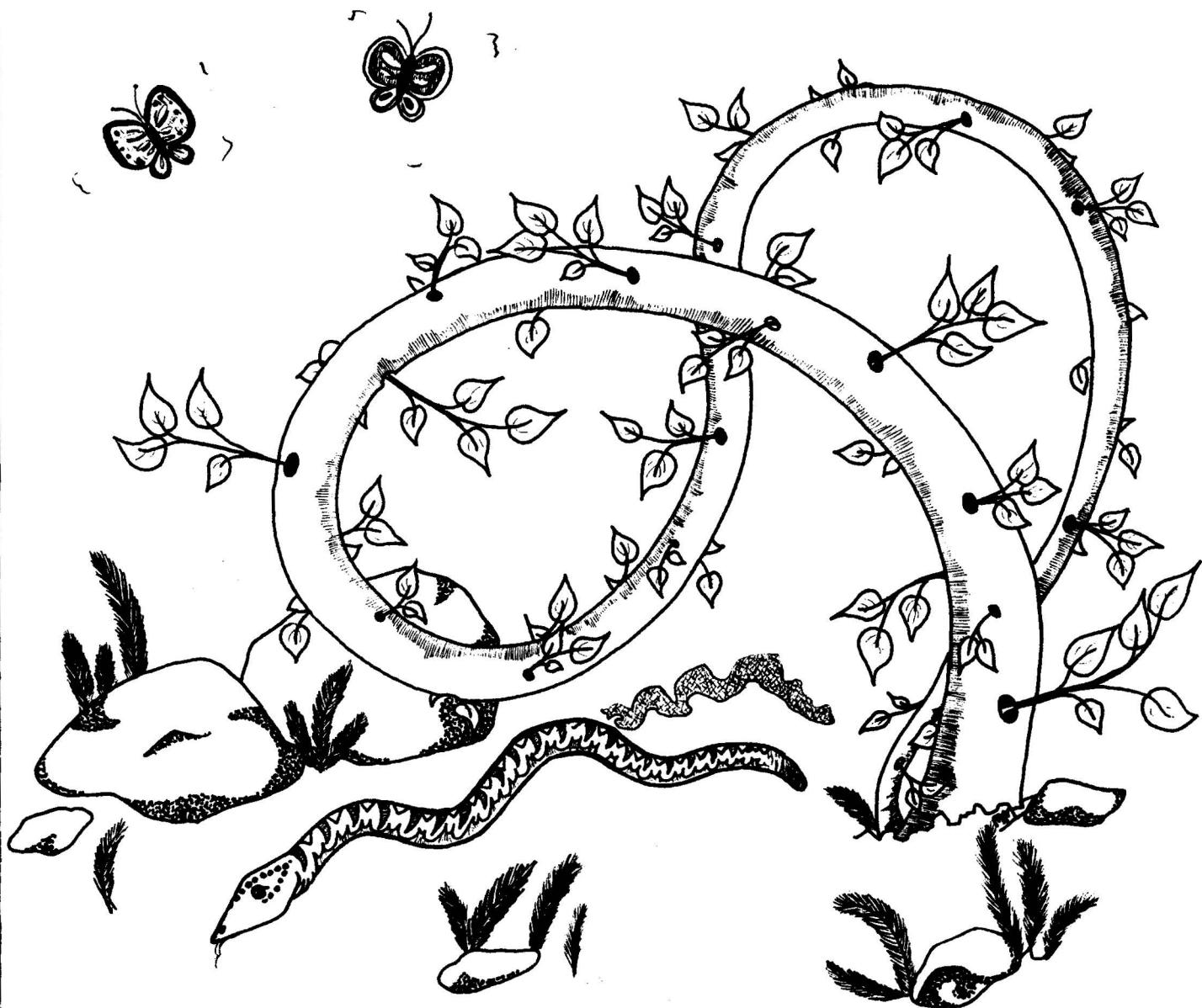
His one-time superior drew a deep breath, in the manner of a man about to make a terrible confession. "Either your First has knowledge of the Hindi language, or Allie has been telling him some family secrets. 'Pankhi' translates to 'Small Fan', which, in Hindu India, is a synonym for..." His voice trailed off, but he looked meaningfully at the jeweled insect on Spock's hand.

McCoy's devilish grin spread from ear to ear. "I wonder if Lieutenant Kirk would have been quite so scared of you, all those years back, if he had known he was taking orders from Commander Butterfly."

Pankhi's copper-brown face got noticeably more coppery, but he smiled with good humor. "I've wondered about that myself."

Kirk felt a laugh coming and did not try to stop it. Within seconds Bones and Prabodh had joined him, and even the returning Allison, though she had no idea what it was about.

Spock only tilted his head, as if studying some peculiar spectacle. But Jim could see laughter dancing in his eye, too. Just like the reflected wings of his fluttering entourage.



The



In-Between



Time

by: Lynn Syck & Laurel Ridener

Beyond all hope
and reason
In darkness and
in pain
I await thee.

Part of me
is gone
Part of me
in him
I await thee.

Can you rescue me
again
Draw me back from
nothingness
I await thee.

Beyond all time
and space
Linked by memory
and love
I await thee.

Like a shooting star,
In the soft summer night.
Like a sunset shining,
Highlighting a glorious blue sky.
Like a waterfall,
Cascading down to the rocks below.
The beauty of the friendship,
Shines brighter than them all.

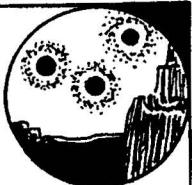
Three men together,
Each so different, yet alike.
The heart and soul,
The logical mind,
And the buffer in between,
To balance the three.
A true friendship, long endured,
Long sustained by all.

Like a

Shooting Star

by: Vonne Shepard

THE HOUSE



OF SAREK

by: Yvonne Fern
art: Mary Stacy-MacDonald

James Kirk awoke suddenly. Every night since Spock had died, it was the same thing. He was outside the radiation chamber, clawing frantically at the transparent wall, Spock's face peeling before him... Spock reaching out for him blindly, hitting the wall... collapsing... turning into a skeleton, while Kahn, appearing like a demon out of nowhere, laughed and laughed and laughed. Kirk thought he would go mad if it happened one more time.

He was always afraid to go to sleep, and stayed awake as long as he could. He kept the lights on, did vigorous physical exercise, and finally in desperation, asked Bones for some of his famous Red Pills. But nothing worked. Even though Spock was alive, and apparently well, nothing worked.

Looking around the room, Kirk reached for a towel and wiped his face. He was still in the recovery complex in ShiKahr where Spock, and all of them had been brought after the refusion several weeks ago. The Vulcans had a very civilized way of treating family and friends of patients. They were housed within the same complex, close to the patient, in rooms which rivalled any hotel. They had all been patients at first, as overwrought and exhausted as they were. Now, however, they were treated as honored guests, awaiting, ironically, their court-martial.

Kirk sighed. He didn't feel very honorable. He looked at his chronometer. Spock was due to return soon. He was away for a few hours, visiting his parents. This was the first time he had left the complex since the Vulcan physicians had officially pronounced him well. Dr. McCoy, unofficially, had grumbled about premature exposure, rest, psychological recovery. Kirk sighed again, and allowed himself to lay back. He closed his eyes tensely, and fell into an uneasy sleep, moaning fitfully as his mind fought the impulses of his exhausted body.

Suddenly, he jumped. The radiation chamber was in front of him again. Spock again turned his burned and peeling face toward him...

"No!" He screamed, tossing wildly. "No... no... no... SPOCK!" He sat up in bed, his chest heaving with fright, anguish, and shame.

There was a swish as the door to his room opened, and Spock, dressed in his overcape, ran anxiously in. "Captain?" Spock's face was distressed.

Kirk blinked the tears from his eyes, and tried to smile reassuringly at Spock. "Nightmare," he said lightly.

Spock's face remained grave, as he took in the damp towel, the blazing lights, Kirk's white, strained, exhausted face. Walking over to the bathroom, he switched off all the lights, except a small one near the door.

"Hey... Spock... don't turn off the lights," Kirk protested nervously, "I... I want t... to read."

Spock poked his head out of the bathroom. "Indeed," he said skeptically. Returning to the bedside, he sat down beside Kirk, and gently applied a cold cloth to his burning eyes. With a larger, dry towel, he rubbed his damp, curly head, raising an eyebrow at the Starfleet uniform Jim had chosen to sleep in. He said nothing, but shook out the covers, and straightened the pillows with military precision; then pushed Jim lightly onto them.

Kirk lay back numbly and shut his eyes. A few seconds later he opened them in panic. Spock was still sitting there. Kirk frowned at him. "Say something," he demanded.

"Yes, Captain," said Spock obediently. "Go to sleep."

"I... I can't," Kirk said bleakly, "I... its... nightmares... you... the..."

"Captain," Spock repeated, "Go to sleep."

Kirk eyed him warily. "Don't you try that 'Forget' stuff on me, Spock," he said. "I don't deserve to forget. I don't want to forget." He turned his face to the wall in utter self-loathing. "I can't forget."

Spock looked at him patiently. "Captain," he said gently, "Go to sleep."

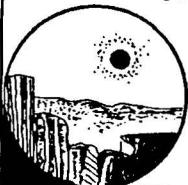
Kirk returned the look suspiciously. Obviously, Spock had one of his stubborn intentions to accomplish something. Kirk could read the worry in his eyes, despite the stone face, and convincingly tranquil manner.

"You missed your calling, Spocko," he said in his best Iotian tone, "You oughta be in pictures." He closed his eyes, then immediately reopened them. "Spock," he said quizzically, "How come you always call me 'Captain' when we're alone, and 'Admiral' in front of the others? Not that I mind," he added wistfully, "But you used to call me 'Jim'. Just plain 'Jim', remember? In fact, the first thing you remembered after the refusion was that my name is Jim."

Spock looked puzzled. "Jim," he repeated, experimentally. Then, frowning, he added, "There are certain... lapses... in my memory, Captain. I do not know how to answer your question. To me, you are a starship captain, the greatest captain the fleet has ever known. It is a term which has both long association, and emo... emo... " He stopped abruptly.

"Emotional significance," Kirk finished. He looked around conspiratorially. "It's okay, Spock, I won't tell anyone you said a bad word."

Spock said with bewilderment, "There is no finer mode of address than 'Captain'. I mean no disrespect."



Kirk smiled a tired smile. "No, Spock, I didn't think you did," he said softly. He closed his eyes slowly, and drifted into a light sleep.



As soon as his breathing became regular, Spock removed his cape, and settled himself carefully beside his friend. He did not close his own eyes, but stared into the semi-darkness, thinking his own thoughts, and waiting...

He didn't have long to wait. Within minutes, Kirk began to roll his head back and forth, moaning. His arms shot out. "SPOCK!"

"Here, Captain," Spock said quietly.

Jim awoke abruptly. "S... Spock?" He whispered with disbelief. He turned over, then quickly sat up. Spock was lying on his back, with his hands behind his head, looking disconcertingly like Pan lolling on a grassy hillside.

"What the hell are you doing Spock?" Jim asked in wonder.

"I am illustrating a point, Captain, which you seem to have some difficulty in grasping."

Jim stared at him blankly.

"I am here," Spock said gently. "Jim." he added firmly.

"Spock, I know what you're trying to do... you're trying to... trivialize this experience... you're trying to say that it's all right -- that I wasn't responsible for your death -- that I can make any mistake, commit any act, perform any stupidity, even end up killing you, and everything will be All Right. Well, it's not! Those shields should have been up. I have to live with what I did."

Spock shook his head. "We've been through all that, Jim. I made the choice to die. You made the choice to bring me back. It is over. You do not have to keep living those moments over and over again. Besides," he added gravely, "You don't really believe that I am here. I think it's time you faced that reality, too." He cocked his head to one side. "Will you, please, go to sleep."

"Are you just going to... stay here?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, Captain," Spock answered politely.

"Well, what if somebody comes in?"

"Are you in the habit of receiving nocturnal visitors?" Spock asked.

"Well, not here," Kirk replied seriously. "But Bones might..."

"I believe the Doctor is capable of interpreting facts correctly, Captain," Spock said, then seeing a smile flit across Jim's face, added, "He has improved, marginally, in that respect."

Kirk sighed. "Okay, Spock -- you win."

He lay back and closed his eyes for what seemed like the millionth time. Spock watched him anxiously for a few minutes, then seeing no sign of immediate distress, closed his own eyes wearily.

Seven times during the next few hours Jim cried out in panic. The eighth time it was worse. Jim sat up in wild grief, not really awake, but not fully asleep. He saw Spock, but seemed to think that Spock was again in the radiation chamber, and that he had finally reached him. Grabbing Spock's arms, he pulled at him frantically, crying "Get out of here... Bones... medics... sickbay... quick!" He began to shake violently. Spock, really alarmed, applied his usual remedy to any assault, the Vulcan nerve pinch.

As Kirk slumped forward, Spock's face changed. Resolution and purpose came into his eyes, and he put Jim down carefully. Going to the door, he engaged the security lock and returned to the bed. Supporting himself on one elbow, he lay down beside the Captain, and looked into his face. A Vulcan stiffness crossed his features, but he gently slid one arm beneath Kirk's back, and with the other, encircled his broad chest.

"Jim," he whispered. "This is Spock. I am here. I am alive. I am well. You are my friend. I have been, and always shall be, yours." He repeated this over and over until it became a kind of chant, and Jim stirred in his arms. He put his free hand on Jim's face... and then, he hesitated.

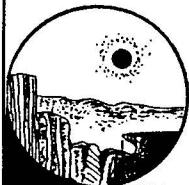
Something in his mind screamed VIOLATION but something in his memory flickered. It wavered for a moment and was gone. Desperately he strove to remember. He began to back away, ashamed and perplexed. He closed his eyes in an intense effort to find the assurance he was looking for, and suddenly it burst before him in a welcome light. He saw his quarters on the Enterprise; he was there, exhausted from many sleepless nights, full of relief, and a painful, unaccustomed joy of having found something. What was it? He probed his capricious memory... Jim!... it was Jim. He saw the scene in a sudden surge of clarity.

He had found the Captain unconscious and amnesiac on an Earthlike planet in danger from an asteroid on a collision course, and had blindly, instinctively mind-melded with him to bring him back to full consciousness. But, after they had left orbit, Spock had secluded himself in his quarters, in humiliation and shame, trying to reconcile his deep conviction that a mind meld of any kind must be consented to, with the fact that he had burst into Jim's mind without permission.

He remembered sitting on his bed arguing with himself that it had turned out all right, and despising himself for thinking that the end justified the means. He had had no idea how long he had sat in self reproach until the door buzzed, and the Captain had walked in.

Spock had hung his head, unwilling to look up, unsure of how to apologize, how to explain. But he hadn't had to. Jim had taken one look at his face, and, characteristically, understood. "Spock," Jim had said warmly, sitting down uninvited beside him, "I am so grateful to you -- I don't know how to tell you."

Then as Spock had opened his mouth to protest, Jim remarked conversationally, "You know, Spocko" (he had taken to calling him 'Spocko'





just after the Iotian incident, in private moments, especially when the situation was delicate, or Spock was in difficulty. The incongruity of the nickname, and the fact that it was an endearment, never failed to diffuse the problem, or to distract Spock from his introspection.)

"You know, Spocko," Jim went on, "There are a lot of things that make us friends. Most of them I don't even understand. But perhaps, overriding them all is that perfect understanding you have of whatever it is I need, at the precise moment I need it. You never fail me, Spock, and I hope you won't think that what I'm going to ask you now is an indication that I think you ever will. But I'm going to ask it anyway."

Spock had glanced at him out of the corner of his eye noting the sincerity and concern in the Captain's face, but he kept his head down resolutely.

"Promise me, Spock, that whatever mess I get myself into, you'll get me out of if you can, by any method you see fit to employ -- mind-meld, sock in the jaw, phaser stun, anything -- just get me out."

Spock looked up quickly, suspiciously, but the Captain was gravely serious. He started to return his gaze stubbornly to the floor, but Jim had stopped him. "Spock," he said firmly, taking Spock's shoulders between his hands, "Look at me."

Spock had raised his eyes and felt a jolt at the expression in Jim's eyes. "I'm asking you," the Captain continued, "Will you please promise not to hesitate in taking any measure you see fit, at any time you see fit, to remedy whatever ills are upon me, if I am incapacitated... as you did today," he emphasized.

"Including mind-meld?" Spock had questioned, unable to comprehend such trust.

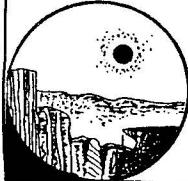
"Especially mind-meld," Kirk had answered staunchly. He added wryly, "I prefer it to a sock in the jaw."

Spock had removed Jim's hands, disconcerted by the unfamiliar surge of affection rising within him, and folded his arms stiffly. He had answered even more stiffly, "Yes." And added "Sir."

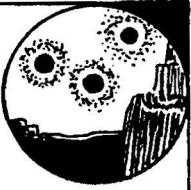
Jim, undeviated, had leaned over and ruffled Spock's hair. "Thanks," he said jauntily. He had got up to leave, but when he reached the door, he turned around. "Anyhow," he said sweetly, "That's an order."

Spock's austere face softened now, remembering, then grew solemn as he thought of the times he had tried to fulfil that "order." The last time was on the now dead **Enterprise**, and the last words he had heard were coming back to him -- had he actually heard them, or had Jim's anguish transferred itself to his darkening mind, as he faded from life? "No... no... I didn't mean this, Spock... no..."

Spock felt his legs weaken at the memory, and turned to his sleeping friend. "I did promise," he said to himself. Placing his sensitive fingers on the correct entry points, as he had done so many times before, he entered his captain's mind. This time, however, he did not put up the Vulcan shield. He let



his whole mind flow unchecked, into Jim's, as Jim's mind flowed into his. His face grew white. This was something a Vulcan did only with another Vulcan, usually with his wife, as a way to achieve Klatka, the Balance. It was the KunatKatra, the merging of spirits, and could be accomplished only if extraordinary affinity had already been achieved. Like Kolnahr, it was reserved for those few who had advanced beyond the teachings of Surak, and were ready to attain completeness. By entering into complete oneness with Jim, he was preventing their bonding with anyone else, ever. He did not fully understand the effect it would have on either of them. He knew only that it was right.



Spock concentrated his strength, and poured out all his knowledge, all his abilities into Jim's mind, and he poured out the energy of his love. He began to feel dizzy and empty, but continued until the transfer was complete. Then, as their two minds mingled, he felt the flow back of a new, forged energy that was himself, but was not, and was Jim, and was more. He trembled, and opened his eyes.

The Captain was waking up. Quickly, Spock bent close to Jim's face. "Always and never, two and one," he said softly. "Remember." He held Kirk to his heart for a brief second, touched his index finger lightly with his own, and cautiously laid him back on the pillows. Slowly, he sat up.

Kirk opened his eyes to see a Spock he had never seen. He was bewildered, and looked up into Spock's eyes. He met there a purity so clear, and a love so intense, that he shivered. He blinked and looked again... and saw only Spock's usual, careful, composed features. He felt confused.

"Spock, have you been here all this time?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, Captain."

"Oh." Kirk looked embarrassed away. "Well, you don't have to stay. I... feel better."

Spock got up. "As you wish, Captain."

"No, Spock, I don't want you to go, necessarily. I thought you might be tired of babysitting. I... I prefer that you stay, just for a while... if you're willing."

Spock walked over to the window and stared out into the blackness. Kirk stretched and rubbed his eyes. "It seems I've managed to get some sleep," he said to Spock. "Did you?"

"Of sorts."

Jim scratched his head. "Uh... Spock, I feel... odd. Sort of peaceful, you know... like something I've been waiting and waiting for has just arrived."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Probably sleep, Jim," he said.

Kirk gave him a quizzical look. "Okay, Spock, let's have it. What did you do? I told you not to make me forget."

"Have you?" Spock asked reasonably.

Kirk frowned. "No..." he said slowly. "But I don't feel so... tortured about it. If I search my mind, I guess I have to say that it's been resolved somehow."

"If you search our minds, Captain, you will find a good many issues resolved."

"Our minds, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain, I..."

"You mind-melded with me?"

"Not exactly, we... exchanged minds. We merged minds. It is the final achievement between those who... who are... friends." He looked at Jim anxiously. "I... I remembered that... I thought... you... asked -- ordered me to take whatever measures..."

"Yes, of course," Kirk interrupted, "But how? I was asleep?"

"Your subconscious mind participated, Captain. Otherwise, I would not have attempted it. Or, if I had been so dishonorable, would not have succeeded."

"But, how was this different from a mind-meld?"

"Put simply, Captain, you are now 'me and you', while I am now 'you and me'."

"Doesn't that make one of us redundant?" Kirk smiled.

"Not at all. You are what you always have been. In addition, you have access to all that I am."

Kirk scratched his head. "I thought I always did."

Spock folded his arms. "You did," he said patiently. "But..."

Kirk dropped his head to one side, and said in a toneless voice, "Illogical, illogical.. 'did' is not 'did not'Norman, coordinate." He uttered a loud beep and flopped back on the bed.

"In a manner of speaking," Spock continued, ignoring Kirk's antics, "What you say is true. However, there are two rather significant differences." He paused, then continued with reluctance. "Captain..."

Kirk sat up and said seriously, "I'm sorry, Spock, I just don't understand. We've always had a sort of telepathy."

"This is not telepathy, Jim. This is unity."

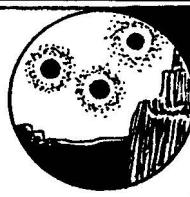
"Like transferring your essence to Bones?"

Spock shook his head. "No." he said. "Not like that at all."

He walked over to Kirk and said carefully, "All that I am, all that I feel, all that I know, you carry within you. And all that you are, think, and feel is



within me. In addition, we are one in Katra... our spirit is one." He peered at Jim closely. "We can touch this within ourselves."



"You mean, all the time?"

"Whenever you wish it, or I do," Spock replied. "It is there." He added quickly, "There are safeguards. Should you wish to disengage this accessibility temporarily, it can be done. You simply will it. You must learn to use this ability. I shall teach you. Our spirit, of course, remains as one at all times." Kirk nodded in understanding.

Spock was at a loss to explain to himself Jim's easy acceptance of that which was so profound. He puzzled whether it was because Jim was human, and therefore did not understand, or whether, because he was human, he did.

This was the pinnacle of Vulcan achievement, the unity which was both mystery and reality. To go beyond control of emotion, to merging of emotion with thought and being had required all of Spock's energy, and will, to accept. He sat down on the nearest chair.

"Spock, can any two people achieve this?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Some Vulcans, if they are... drawn to one another, can achieve it. It is extremely rare."

"You mean if they love each other," Kirk said simply.

"I would not have put it that way, but..." Spock looked around the room, straightened his sleeves, flicked imaginary dust off the chair, inspected the ceiling, then, lowered his head and said, "Yes."

"But how does..."

"Jim," Spock interrupted, "What am I thinking now?"

Kirk looked surprised. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them in astonishment. "In the end, my t'hy'la, there is only truth," he said slowly, "Did I get it right?"

"Perfectly."

"But, Spock, this is fantastic! Why didn't you do this years ago? When you were on the Galileo, when we were in Tholian space, when..."

"As our presence here demonstrates, Captain, I did. In a limited way."

"You mean you contacted me, it was sort of one-way."

Spock permitted himself the ghost of a smile. "Sort of," he said.

"Well," Kirk said blithely, "We can get rid of the communicators. But tell me, why only now, why not then?"

"You were very young, Captain."

"What do you mean?"

"I think, perhaps, that you would not have been willing to share some of my difficulties."

Kirk wrinkled his forehead. "I don't know what you mean."

"Jim," Spock said quietly, "Such a union as this precludes other forms of union."

Kirk's eyes widened in alarm. Instinctively, he put his hand to the front of his trousers. "Spock," he said desperately, "Spock..." "

"No, Captain, not that. I think you will find that in that respect you are as you always have been, and will continue to be. But you will also find that you are fulfilled, satisfied, in all other respects. That is the purpose of KunatKatra, The Merging. As we are not male and female, Pon Farr, or... the human equivalent, is a separate consideration. However, The Merging, by its very nature both unites, and separates. You will not need what others need, nor need to want what others want, a state of being which separates you from other men. That is what I meant when I said you would not have wished to share my difficulties."

"Spock," Kirk said dryly, "A starship captain is by definition, separate from other men." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Like it or not," he added, more to himself than Spock.

"True, Captain. However, you always had the possibility. Now, you do not. You will not be able to achieve the same degree of unity with anyone else."

"Well, I never have anyway," Kirk said reasonably. "You've always been closer to me than anyone else."

Spock sighed. "Indeed," he said. Glancing at Jim's cheerful face, he added, "It is imperative that you learn to monitor it. I would not wish to lie in being with you at an inappropriate time."

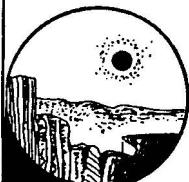
"Lie in being?"

"Yes. A kind of companionship which exists when no actual communication is taking place."

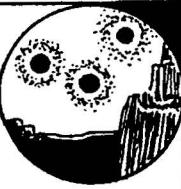
"Oh," Kirk said, "Nor I, you."

Spock sighed again. "Jim, I have consciously withdrawn from you only three times since I first began to be... since we have become friends. Once at Kolinahr, and once each, during Pon Farr. You, of course, will have to exercise this facility more frequently."

Kirk reddened. "Thank god," he said. He added, "You certainly did seem to withdraw from me at one Pon Farr." He rubbed his hand across his chest in remembrance."



Spock's face grew solemn. "I wasn't counting that one." He searched Kirk's face. "Captain... Jim, if this is not to your liking after all, if it causes you more discomfort than you are willing to bear... if..."



"It seems to be causing you more discomfort than its causing me." Kirk replied. "I think it is glorious. I feel... whole... real... true. But... but you're so, so private, Spock. Are you sure that you want to do this?"

"It is done, Captain, and I am sure."

Kirk looked at him, and shook his head in awe. "You couldn't give up your physical life for me, so you give up your mental and emotional life for me, is that it, Spock?" He asked softly.

Spock made no answer.

"Well what happens now?" Kirk asked. "I mean, will everyone notice it?"

"Humans rarely notice what they do not wish to see," Spock replied. "And all Vulcans will accept the fact that you are part of the collective consciousness which all Vulcans share."

Kirk grimaced. "That sounds awfully like Landru."

Spock looked amused. "Peace," he said, "Joy and tranquility be with you, Friend."

"Spock," Kirk said, helplessly.

"There is no cause for alarm, Captain. There are many degrees of consciousness, and consciousness is not control."

"But what can you possibly gain from such a unity?" Kirk asked. It seems that all the advantage is on my side. As you're fond of pointing out, Vulcans are so much more advanced in these matters. Why not merge with a Vulcan?"

Spock gave him an exasperated, weary glance. "To hear you abusing the limited sense you have, Captain, is enough to make me wonder."

"I'm not being difficult, Spock. I... just feel that I haven't been... much of a friend. I... you've put up with so much... as my First Officer, my confidante, my closest friend, even my conscience, when Bones wasn't busy being it, but well, I took it all for granted. I suppose I carried the captaincy into the friendship. It was only after you were... gone... that I realized what you are — what you really are to me — steadfast, loyal, full of real lo..."

"Quite," Spock said quickly.

"Well," Kirk continued, "What have I given, Spock?"

"Captain, there is a saying on Vulcan that roughly translates into this: "Those men are friends between whose two bodies, the Creator has divided a

single soul." In other words, it doesn't matter. You are what you are. As I am. However," he added, "To answer your question, you... accepted me. You... saw me."

"I think I know what you mean," Kirk said. "There is a saying on Earth which, untranslated into Vulcan, goes like this: 'If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than it was because he was he, and I was I.' Montaigne," he added, "Old France."

Spock nodded. "Yes," he said. "It is a pity that the verb is so often ill-applied. In its correct context, and accompanied by some measure of reason, it does tend to have meaning."

"I agree," said Kirk, "It is an overworked word. Like logic."

Spock shifted uncomfortably. "Captain, can we abandon this discussion? I believe that all is understood."

Kirk opened his mouth, then as a peculiar expression came over his face, he closed it. "All right, Spock," he said a little too cooperatively, "Perhaps you could explain more about this mental phenomenon."

"Willingly, Captain."

"For instance," Kirk said hurriedly, "How would I go about communicating to you, using this method of course, that I feel very badly about the way I have sometimes treated you in the past... things like calling you a traitor when we were all afflicted with that aging disease on Gamma Hydra Five, or when we tangled with the Feeders of Vaal -- you had a legitimate concern about our interference, and I... just brushed it off with a joke about your satanic appearance.. things like that which have bothered me, shamed me for years. How would I tell you, how deeply sorry I am?"

Spock stood up, clasped his hands behind his back, and eyed his friend with long-suffering patience. "You seem to have found an effective means of communication," he said.

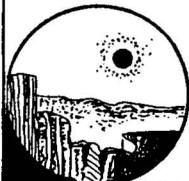
"Sorry," Kirk said contritely, "I had to say it. But -- go on, please explain."

"The process is not unlike natural thought patterns," Spock began, "The dissimilarity occurs in the direction of energy. As with light, a wavelength is..." There was a knock at the door.

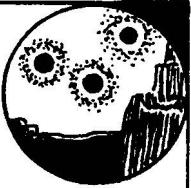
Spock made a noiseless leap, and silently disengaged the lock. He resumed his stance at the window, and nodded to Jim.

"Come," Kirk called.

Bones sauntered in, his face anxious. "Jim," he said worriedly, "When was Spock supposed to get back? I just went to look in on him and he's not... oh," he stopped as Spock switched on a light. "There you are. Why the hell aren't you in bed? You're supposed to be recov..." he stopped again, and looked from Spock to Kirk. "What's the matter?"



Kirk and Spock exchanged glances.



McCoy began to scowl. "Well?" He demanded.

"Nightmare," Jim and Spock said in unison.

"Who?" McCoy asked.

"Why are you awake, Doctor?" Spock cut in quickly.

"Me? Oh -- couldn't sleep."

"Why not?" Kirk asked.

"Well, I... wait a minute, I'm the doctor. I ask the medical questions around here," Bones said truculently. He scowled at his friends "Somethin's goin' on," he added accusingly. "Are you all right Jim?"

"Thank you, Doctor, we are fine," Spock replied pointedly.

"I was coming to you, Spock," McCoy answered in an aggrieved tone. "Are you going to tell me what's going on or not?"

"Not, I should think, Doctor," Spock said calmly, "As you can see, the Admiral, although somewhat fatigued, is in the best of health. And I too, am quite well, if that is of interest."

McCoy snorted. "Jim," he began.

"Later, Bones, I'm fine."

The Doctor crossed his arms in familiar battle-stance "Jim," he repeated. "It's almost sunrise. Or 'sunrise' he said exaggeratedly to Spock, and here you are, both fully dressed, looking as though you haven't had five minutes sleep between you..."

"You would have more cause for concern if we were both fully undressed," Kirk said, smiling. "We've been talking."

"Why can't you talk in the daytime?" McCoy grumbled. "Spock's parents have laid on a shindig for what is now this afternoon. You're gonna look pretty foolish falling asleep in the middle of it."

"Stop worrying, Bones, everything is fine."

McCoy regarded them both suspiciously. "Well, I'll let that pass," he said.

Someone is coming down the hall, Kirk thought, receiving a message from Spock. Female.

"Open the door, Bones," he said.

"What? Oh..." McCoy turned, as Uhura peeked through the doorway.

"I heard voices," she said sheepishly, "I was just taking a little walk... are you all right, Admiral?"

Kirk smiled sweetly at his Communications Officer. "Just fine, Uhura," he said.

"Maybe you should post a notice on your door, Jim," McCoy said sarcastically, "Status of Admiral: Fine."

Uhura looked bewilderingly around her. "Mister Spock?" She questioned delicately.

Spock nodded gently. He had a soft spot for Uhura.

"What were you doing awake Uhura?" McCoy asked.

"Rest of the crew, Admiral," Spock announced formally, as Scotty, Sulu, and Chekov appeared.

McCoy threw up his hands, and sat down on the bed beside Jim.

"Is it a party?" Scotty asked hopefully. He held up a bottle. "I've brought a wee drop."

Chekov, with a broad smile, raised a bag. "Fruit!" He said happily.

Sulu stepped neatly in front of him. "And I've got..." he grinned expectantly at Uhura, "Meat!" He flourished a package of preserved, but authentic, beef.

"Meat!!" cried Uhura and Kirk simultaneously, throwing apologetic looks at Spock.

"Wherever did you get it, Sulu?" Uhura asked

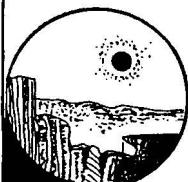
Sulu looked at Scotty, who smiled sheepishly. "I happened to pass the food banks on the Excelsior," he said.

Suddenly the tension broke and the room was filled with laughter. Kirk brought out glasses, and McCoy nipped the bottle from Scotty. Scotty whisked it back expertly. "You're a doctor, not a bartender," he reminded him.

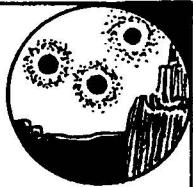
Against the hubbub, Uhura walked over to Spock, who was leaning against the bathroom door, arms folded, observing the proceedings with detached amusement.

"Mister Spock, Sugar," she said lightly, "You're the guest of honor." She took his hand, and drew him into the circle of friends.

Spock allowed himself to be installed in their midst, and accepted a glass of bright blue liquid. The crew turned to him, instinctively, and raised their glasses in salute. As with one voice, they addressed him.



"Live long, and prosper, Spock," they said.



"What I don't understand," McCoy said to Sarek later that afternoon, as the crew enjoyed the rare privilege of Vulcan hospitality, "Is why the whole lot of us were awake. There's Spock, and Jim up all night talking, as if they haven't been talking all day, every day, since the refusion; and Uhura 'taking a walk' in the hall; then the rest of them popping out of who knows where, looking for a party. And even I woke up for some reason." He shook his head, a perplexed look on his face. "And there's somethin' ... different about Jim, too. I'd be worried, but, well, it just doesn't seem worth worrying about, somehow. What do you make of it, Sarek?"

Sarek rose from the bench to which he and McCoy had gravitated, a bit apart from the others. His eyes swept the atrium, the greenery, the guests, and rested for a moment on Kirk, who was in animated conversation with Uhura. McCoy, still sitting, looked up at his majestic height, and kingly bearing with admiration. He thought so highly of Sarek, that he often forgot he was Spock's father, and could be heard praising him for the very virtues he condemned in Spock -- steadiness, breadth and presence of mind. This was of great amusement to the crew, and of equal irritation to Spock, who lost no time in pointing out that Sarek was one hundred percent Vulcan.

Now, rising to join the others, he was struck by the fact that Sarek was beginning to look old. He sighed, as Sarek turned to face him. "We will talk, McCoy," he said kindly. "You will remain after the gathering has ended, as will my sons."

McCoy's mouth opened at the plural, as Sarek bowed courteously, and moved to his wife's side. The jewels on the IDIC symbols around his neck winked in the bright Vulcan sunlight which shone through the transparent roof. McCoy wondered why he wore two. Amanda was conducting the party around the public rooms, pointing out items of interest -- plants, artifacts, and practical objects, explaining their symbolism, functions, history, and answering all their questions with delight. A warm and generous woman at any time, her gratitude to the crew for their single-minded, cohesive efforts to save her son had made her radiant. More than one member of the crew saw in Amanda what they only sensed in Spock, but was nevertheless as characteristic of him as his Vulcan features. Something about her direct, genuine, polite attention to each guest, her simplicity of manner, and absence of affectation, was reminiscent of Spock's absorption in any issue to which he turned his attention. The crew was enchanted, and kept asking directly, or indirectly for anecdotes, and incidents of Spock's boyhood. In this matter, however, Amanda refused to be drawn.

Turning to Sulu, who had inquired about a small sword hanging on the wall, asking if it had been a plaything of Spock's, she answered, "My son is best equipped in memory, and inclination, to acquaint you with his past. I can only tell you what a mother remembers." She smiled at Sulu. "Sometimes a mother's memories differ from her son's."

Sulu accepted this with good grace. "Sometimes," he said, winking at Chekov, "That's good."

"Well," Scotty sighed, "it's no good askin' Mister Spock about it. He likes us to think he was born this way."

Sarek stepped in. "My wife," he said, "the banquet awaits. Our guests are hungry." He gestured to the group. "Come, my friends." He indicated to Spock to lead the way.

Spock instinctively stepped aside for his "Captain," so the rest of the crew fell into rank formation. Sarek looked surprised, but said nothing as he led the way to a large, light-filled room, where several attendants stood before a long, glittering table.

"Here, you break rank," he said, and ushering Spock before him, indicated to the others where they were to sit.

When they were seated, Kirk found himself on one side of his host, with Spock on the other, at the head of the table. The reason for this was not apparent until the meal had ended, and Kirk forgot about it as dish after dish was carried in, each more splendid than the one which preceded it. Even the absence of meat could not detract from their full, ripe, splendor. Fruit, vegetable, grain and nut compotes were consumed, and pronounced superlative by the crew.

Conversation flourished, and even laughter (furnished mainly by the *Enterprise* party) was not unheard. Amanda and Sarek were perfect hosts, attentive, stimulating, and able to bring out in each guest, his or her own special personality.

Scotty was in his element, finding a willing audience for his detailed account of the *Excelsior*'s engineering inferiority. McCoy, ever sensitive to what was most human, engaged Amanda in reminiscences of Earth, while Sulu and Uhura regaled Sarek with descriptions of planets in which he was genuinely interested. Even Chekov was so busy eating, and answering questions, that he forgot to mention Russia.

The number of times Kirk was applied to for verification, and augmentation of incidents did not go unnoticed by Sarek, nor did the obvious devotion to both the Admiral and Spock. Kirk was touched by their open praise of him, and Spock was obliged on several occasions to inspect his plate minutely. Both began to feel a lessening of the guilt that plagued them, each time they remembered why they were all there.

When they had all eaten their fill of unreconstituted food, and all but exhausted their store of anecdotes, Amanda rose. "There is musical entertainment in the next room," she announced. "Will you follow me, please?"

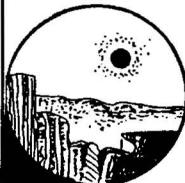
"I request that McCoy and Kirk remain for a few minutes," Sarek said. "And, my wife, will you also return for a moment when our guests have been made comfortable?"

Amanda bowed, and conducted the crew out of the room.

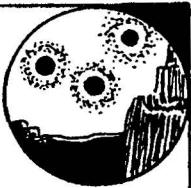
"Spock," called Sarek, seeing his son start for the door, "Your presence is required also."

Spock returned to his chair.

"Much has been made of the fact that my son is heir to two cultures," Sarek addressed McCoy and Kirk when the door had closed. "And rightly. His heritage is unique. It has, however, given him great difficulty. But, it has also



been of great benefit -- to him, and through him -- to all of Vulcan." He paused, as Amanda returned to the table.



"Spock is a living illustration of possibility, of unity, of hope among divergent cultures, diverse life. And yet," he said slowly, "In the realm of the Infinite, diversity is of little consequence. The Katra has no culture... the soul calls no planet, 'home.' Through the refusion, Spock has come to understand that which, through his heritage, and through James Kirk, he has already known." He faced McCoy. "These men are brothers, and more than brothers. But, as brothers, they are both my sons." He turned to Kirk. "James Tiberius Kirk, son of Kirk of Earth, I honor your father, I honor your mother. With no diminishing of they who bore you, that which has sustained you, I welcome you into the House of Sarek of Vulcan, Amanda of Earth. May it please you to call it your own."

He bent toward an astonished Kirk, and lifting one of the IDIC symbols from around his neck, placed it over Jim's head. "Soul of Kirk, I greet thee, Spirit of Spock I meet in thee, once created, created as one."

Removing the second IDIC, he lowered it over Spock's head, and intoned, "Soul of Spock, I greet thee, spirit of Kirk I meet in thee, once created, created as one." He touched his hand to Kirk's, at the same time touching his other hand to Spock's. Kirk jumped as if an electric current had hit him, then recollecting himself, sat immobile.

Sarek closed his eyes. "That which was created at the time of the beginning, we acknowledge," he said solemnly. He opened his eyes, and stood up. "It is done."

Spock and Jim looked at each other, then at McCoy.

"Sarek," Kirk began huskily, "I don't know what to say... I..."

"There is nothing to be said, Kirk. What is, is. I have simply given voice to it."

"Sarek is correct, Jim," Amanda said, her eyes bright. "One of the things I have learned, living on Vulcan, is that it is very easy to miss, to overlook, to complicate things that are really quite simple. To see clearly is an art to which all Vulcans aspire. The reason that emotion is given so little credence, is that it often obscures truth."

"Sometimes emotion is truth, Amanda," McCoy put in.

"Yes, Doctor -- of course it is. Sometimes," Amanda replied. "That is what Vulcans have to learn."

"Well," said McCoy, trying to smile, "They'll have a couple of good teachers. If I know these two souls, they'll be debating the point from now 'til kingdom come. Somebody ought to learn something from all that wrangling."

Sarek smiled an enigmatic smile. "Perhaps we will, McCoy," he said. "And now, my wife, you are fatigued. We will excuse you from the music."

"I am rather tired," Amanda replied. She gave her hand to McCoy, who pumped it vigorously, and thanked her charmingly for her hospitality. Then, as Kirk rose, she walked over to him, and kissed his cheek. "Good night, my son," she said, and raised her fingers to Sarek, as he came forth to escort her to her bedchamber. They walked to

Spock, who was standing by the door. Stopping before him, Amanda bowed slightly. "Good night, my son," she whispered lovingly, and started to pass by.

Spock hesitated, then placing his hand on her diminutive shoulder, bent down, and touched his lips briefly to her forehead.

"Good night, Mother," he said in his usual, formal voice.

McCoy's mouth fell open. He snapped it shut hastily, as Kirk threw him a warning glance.

Amanda's eyes filled as she looked up into Spock's non-committal face. She turned to Kirk, and her lips trembled.

"Thank you, Admiral," she said, and quickly left the room with Sarek.

McCoy picked up his empty glass in embarrassment, and Kirk fingered the IDIC around his neck. All three were silent. Spock cleared his throat.

"Gentlemen," he said, "The music room is that way."

When they had returned to the complex, Sulu, Uhura, Chekov and Scotty stood talking for a moment before they parted for the night. They agreed that they had not spent a more satisfying evening together since they could remember.

"It's been so long," Uhura sighed, "Since we all just had fun."

"Well, make the most of it, lass," Scotty said. "There won't be much fun at Starfleet next week."

"Mister Scott," Chekov asked, "Do you think that's the reason Admiral Kirk, Doctor McCoy, and Mister Spock stayed behind — to work out a strategy for the court-martial?"

"Aye," Scotty replied, "Something like that. But I dinna think there's much that even Sarek can do about it. There's no way o' gettin' around the fact that the Enterprise is gone, the Excelsior was sabotaged, direct Starfleet Orders were disobeyed, the security system damaged..."

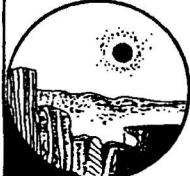
"Yes, Mister Scott, we all know what we did," Sulu reminded him grimly.

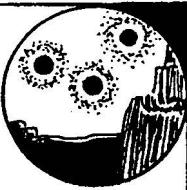
"Well," said Uhura, "If the combined efforts of Admiral Kirk, Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Sarek fail, then even God couldn't do it."

"Uhura!" Exclaimed Scotty, shocked.

"It's all right, Scott," Sulu said, smiling, "we all have our own deities... I'm going to turn in," he added, "And pray to mine."

They parted with mutual good wishes, and entered their rooms with similar thoughts.





A few kilometers away, Sarek offered McCoy a drop of Saurian brandy. "It may help to stimulate brain cells," he said placidly, "A moderate amount of alcohol, contrary to history, does."

McCoy accepted the glass with relief. "Let me get this straight," he said. "You're telling me that Jim and Spock are mentally interconnected." He frowned. "Well, that's not so hard to understand. I've always thought there was something wrong with both of them. The part I don't get is that we, the rest of the 'renegade crew' are also connected, in a way that you say will make the court-martial easier. That I fail to see."

Sarek sighed. "Non verbal communication is not new, McCoy. It has merely been neglected by humanoids in general, because of their reliance on communication devices. The electrochemical revolution of the last century, on Earth at least, actually retarded the development of a far less complex means of communication." He turned to Spock. "Perhaps you would be the logical one to explain this to the Doctor."

Spock raised his eyebrows. "Hardly," he said. "The Doctor disbelieves everything I tell him on principle."

"No, go on Spock. I'll make an effort," McCoy said dryly.

"Very well. The brain, as you are aware, emits energy in the form of brain waves. This emission is not confined, as was once thought, to the individual body. It can be directed outwards to find reception in another brain."

"Come on, Spock, I know all that. What I'm asking is how concrete, individual messages can be transmitted through space, and arrive, intact, in somebody else's head. It's easy enough to do with a senciever implanted in the skull, but how can the normal, humanoid brain perform that function?"

"It appears, Doctor," said Spock, bracing himself for trouble, "That strong emotional ties cause a chemical field to envelop the cortex. This field acts as a magnetic field to emitted, directed impulses from the emotional partner. The chemical which arises from the occurrence of emotion," he went on quickly, seeing triumph arising in McCoy's face, "Can be produced by other means. In other words, Doctor, the control of the effect of emotion allows this transference of energy to take place. It requires practice, discipline, and physical proximity. It is only one kind of telepathy." He paused, and looked at his father. "There are others."

Sarek nodded. "The Doctor, is, no doubt, aware of others," he said significantly. "The type to which Spock is referring depends not only on proximity, but on certain conditions. Humanoids who know each other well, often practice this kind of thought transference even when unaware that they are doing so. It is a common occurrence among people who have lived together, worked together for a sustained number of years, in a relatively enclosed environment. Particularly those who share a common goal. A monastery is such an environment, as are institutions having some of the same properties. Commitment to a leader, and a metaphysical or spiritual purpose enhance these conditions. Thus the **Enterprise** may have engendered the same results."

"Starfleet's purpose was hardly metaphysical," McCoy replied. "Seeking out new life so that the Federation would have more planets than the Klingon Empire."

Sarek gave him a piercing look. "Was that your purpose? Was it Kirk's? In the end, was it the Federation's?" He shook his head. "Often, there is purpose behind purpose. At any rate, I think this may answer your question about what caused you all to awake last night. You are all aware of Admiral Kirk in a vague sense, all of the time. You were all within physical range. Perhaps something happened, something of unusually great force, to disturb you."

He gave Kirk an appraising look.

Kirk returned his gaze uncertainly, and turned to Spock.

Spock sighed resignedly. "He may as well be told, Father," he said.

"McCoy," Sarek said. "There is a process which Vulcans may choose to initiate, if they are able, in order to achieve Klatka, the Balance. It is done only rarely with one who is not wife, or husband. With one exception it has never been done with an Outworlder, until now." He smiled a gentle, remote smile. "Spock is, perhaps, more like his father than he would wish. I too, have undertaken to break with tradition: My wife is myself."

McCoy sat up. "You mean that Jim..." He glared at Spock. "Why you pointy..." He stopped, in deference to Sarek. "You mean," he repeated, "That Spock's mind is in Jim? Spock, why can't you keep your own marbles -- you're always passing them on to somebody else. What's wrong with them, anyway? You don't seem too anxious to have them."

"Doctor," replied Spock icily, "If you were not so entirely devoid of perception, I would be relieved from the task of pointing out that I am in full possession of my brain. I have simply chosen to allow the Admiral access to it. And, as he does not object, you are certainly in no position to."

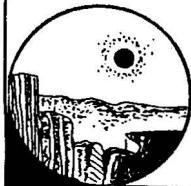
"Well, I like Jim the way he is, or was. It's bad enough having to contend with Spock in Spock. Now I've got to cope with Spock in Jim."

"You have the added advantage, Doctor, of coping, as you politely put it, with Jim in me."

Bones ignored him. He put his hands over his face. "It sounds like Sargon, all over again," he said with dejection.

"Do not be concerned, McCoy." Sarek reassured the doctor. "Nothing exists which did not exist before. It is merely affirmed -- realized. KunatKatra has little to do with personality, and nothing at all to do with individuality. Amanda is still Amanda. Sarek is still himself."

Seeing that McCoy was really distressed, Kirk took over. "Bones, he said earnestly, "I think you're looking at this thing all wrong. It's just like a permanent mind-meld, only two-way. It helps, Bones, it really does. It... answers something. I'm... more me than I was, that's all."



"Well, why do you need Spock, in order to be Jim?"

"I don't know why, Bones. I just know."

"Is that what you meant when you said 'once created, created as one'?" McCoy asked Sarek.

"Yes," Sarek replied. "It is not a thing of the body, McCoy, it is a thing of the soul. Spock and Kirk have always shared the same spirit, and the same purpose." He sighed. "I have long been reconciled to the fact that Spock chose Starfleet as a way of life. I became so when I discovered his purpose — Life. Seeking out new life in order to find the answers that all men seek. There are many roads to the same end. This is theirs. For some, it is marriage, family, planetary pursuits. But they go beyond... on an absolute path that precludes all else. It is logical that they achieve KunatKatra. To do otherwise is an assault on truth, and an acceptance of imbalance. This is why my son has been unhappy. Always, when there is not balance, there is unhappiness."

"Unhappiness is an emotion, Sarek," McCoy pointed out.

"Yes," Sarek answered. "But it is also a condition. The unhappiness may or may not be felt, but it exists nevertheless."

"Well," said McCoy, beginning to be mollified, "What happens as a result of it?"

"That which happens as a result of any unity — birth, discovery, new life. It depends on the nature of the uniting forces. In this case, immediately at least, it will serve Kirk well at his court-martial."

"Why?"

"He will be stronger, more able to see, and therefore to communicate that which drove him to his action. He may well be the force which is needed to effect an awareness of the higher good." He sighed deeply, his face grave. "The Federation is in need of such awareness."

McCoy drained his glass. "And what does Spock get out of all this?"

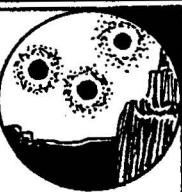
"Spock would be the logical person to ask," Sarek replied.

"Well, Spock?" McCoy asked.

"'Getting' was not my object, Doctor," Spock said slowly. "My intent was to serve. However," he added, characteristically honest, "I am favored with that to which not even you can object — a better understanding of my human inheritance."

McCoy looked shamefaced. "Spock," he said embarrassedly, "I didn't want you any different either. I... sort of got used to you the way you are. Dammit, man we went through hell to bring you back, just because we like you the way you are."

Spock raised his eyebrows. "Hmm," he said, "A pointy-eared, unfeeling, inhuman, computerized, satanic hobgoblin. Really, Doctor, I question your taste."



McCoy looked uncomfortably at Sarek, who seemed amused. "You have been a good friend to my son," he said. "It is wise not to take oneself over-seriously."

"I've always wanted to ask you something, Ambassador," McCoy said. "Spock has always seemed more Vulcan than you, or even some other Vulcans I've come across. Why do you appear so... human?"

"It is not I, but Amanda in me," Sarek replied significantly. "Balance. And, McCoy, if, on Earth, your medical veracity were always being questioned, would you not make great effort to establish your qualifications?"

"Indeed I would," McCoy said. His face reddened. "I'm sorry, Spock -- I really have been a bastard."

Spock looked out of a convenient window.

"My son, the Doctor has spoken," Sarek reproved gently.

Spock swiveled slowly around to face the Doctor. "Acknowledged," he said.

Kirk, who had been sitting silently for some time chuckled, and as the realization came over him that this was really happening, that Spock was really present, annoying Bones as he had so many times before, he let out his first laugh since before Spock had died. "Well, Bones," he said, "You have done something that no one else could have done. You've made me realize that we're all really here."

"Yes," said Spock morosely, "Unfortunately, we will always need him to establish our existence. Ironic, isn't it?"

The vague hurt which had been hovering in McCoy's face vanished suddenly, and he relaxed. He passed his glass to Sarek. "What's next?" He asked.

Sarek refilled his glass. "Next, McCoy, I wish to speak with you," he said, "Spock..."

Spock rose quickly, and turned to Kirk. "Admiral, you will be interested in my father's recent acquisition, an antique chess set. Two-dimensional, of course, a product of Old Britain."

Kirk made his way to Spock's side. "And even if I'm not, I should follow you, right?" He said cheerfully.

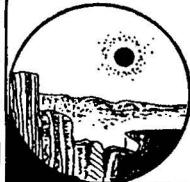
"Correct, Kirk," Sarek answered without turning around.

Kirk winked at McCoy, and left hastily.

Sarek sat forward and studied the Doctor's face for a moment before beginning. "McCoy," he began, "I have welcomed Kirk as my son, for many reasons. I have not extended this courtesy to you. I wish you to know why."

Bones inspected his glass. "That's not necessary, Sarek, I..."

"Hear me," the Vulcan interrupted. He sat back and said slowly, "Unity is right where there is sameness. In such cases, there is no logical alternative. But, McCoy, unity is not the end. It is the beginning." He paused. "My sons are strong of will, and strong of purpose." He paused again. "Do you understand?"



McCoy wrinkled his brow. "Well, they're both pig-headed enough, if that's what you mean."



A faint smile touched Sarek's lips. "As a colloquialism, it will suffice. There is much they will learn, much they will achieve as one. But, even united, they are not complete. Their unity will strengthen their purpose. It will also strengthen their flaws."

McCoy raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Each sees no fault in the other... or, if he does, finds reason to dismiss it. Spock's intelligence is unparalleled, his accomplishments well-known, his character inestimable. And as for Kirk, my respect for him exceeds that of almost any other man. Among Federation diplomats, he is a hero of almost mythological proportions. But, McCoy, neither is truly wise."

McCoy's face took on a defensive look. "Well, now," he objected, "I don't know that that's entirely true. Why... "

"Why do I speak like this of two men who are superlative officers, heroic leaders, fine, even great thinkers, extraordinary beings by any standard? Two men who are men, well past youth?" He gave a small shrug. "Age, and accomplishment are relative. To the Infinite, we are not yet born." He looked at McCoy, and said steadily, "Always, they have needed you, turned to you, not as Doctor, not only as friend, but as father... "

"Father!!" McCoy spluttered. "Me? Jim?.... Spock?! Uh, Sarek, you've got it all wrong."

Sarek smiled. "Have I? Both are wise enough to know that they need opposition. From whom do they get it? Think of your years together. Spock analyses, Kirk decides, Spock follows, sometimes against his own judgment, and McCoy objects. Their need of you then was great. It is now greater. It is because they are as one, that they may fail to reach the very goals they seek."

"Which are?"

Sarek shook his head. "I do not know, McCoy. An answer to the question that is never answered... is this all that I am... is there nothing more? Spock told me of his discovery on V'Ger's planet. And he knows, as I do that to come close to the answer is the work of a lifetime." He looked into the Doctor's eyes. "McCoy," he said gravely, "Kirk has not begun to face what is before him: his ship destroyed by his own hand... his new-found son, dead... his life as a starship captain in all probability destroyed. Until now, he has had only Spock in his mind, heart, and will. And now that Spock is well... "

"You think he might crack?"

"No. Spock is within him. He will not 'crack' as you put it. But he will suffer... how he will suffer... and Spock with him. I cannot allow such a consequence of so great a deed." He hesitated, then searched McCoy's face as he asked levelly, "Spock is not fully recovered, is he?"

McCoy frowned. "Well, no," he said slowly, sensing the Ambassador's watchfulness. "Not really. Oh, he's not missing any marb... uh mental abilities... it's just that..." he trailed off lamely.

"Yes?" Sarek probed.

"Well, I know you have great faith and justifiable pride in your physicians, and they're first rate, no question about that. And I'm just an old country doctor. But, well, I think they're going about it the wrong way." He looked at Sarek uncertainly.

"I value your opinion, McCoy," Sarek said simply.

McCoy took a deep breath. "All right," he said, "Here it is: I know Spock, Sarek, I really do. The Katra isn't the only reason, either. We've lived through some very tough situations, and I've seen Spock in circumstances that even Jim doesn't know about. And I can tell you that he's as chock full of feelings as any human. He's also as full of feelings as any Vulcan," he added, glancing appraisingly at Sarek who remained expressionless. "You see, Sarek, Spock has had to do far, far more than any Vulcan who has ever lived, to achieve the kind of control he has over these emotions. He's got a double dose, and only half the Vulcanness to deal with them that the rest of you have. Although I've always suspected that training has a lot more to do with your "logic" than any innate biological difference. Anyway, since his death and that terribly, terribly rapid regrowth on Genesis, he's just not had the strength, or the psychological help to -- to interweave them."

"Interweave?"

"Yes. He's got all of his mental capacity back -- with a few gaps in memory -- I don't know, maybe that's my fault, maybe I didn't take care of his Katra well enough or something, but anyway, he's got the brains. And he's got his full load of feelings back too, but they just don't relate to each other. I mean, when he appears to "be" Vulcan, he's really only operating on one set of habits or memories. At other times, when he's with us, the crew, I mean, he sometimes has these... lapses."

Sarek looked concerned. "Lapses?" he asked.

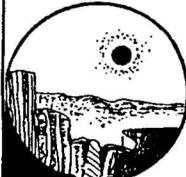
"Yes... well, maybe they're not lapses, maybe they're just developments. I'm not worried about them -- it's all part of a continuing refusion, but he needs time."

"Explain."

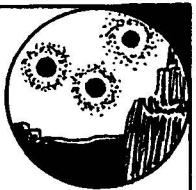
McCoy sighed. "There's not much to say -- it's just a feeling, and I don't even know whether it has anything to do with recovery, or its simply Spock's way of being glad he's alive, and being willing to show it for once." He shook his head. "My God, after all he's been through I'm surprised he's not crazy."

Sarek looked puzzled. "Is that your explanation?" he asked.

"No -- yes... at least, for now," McCoy said uncomfortably. Despite the rapport which had developed between them, McCoy was wise enough -- and medically competent enough -- to realize that any example he could give would only distress Sarek further. His mind reached back to the incident which had prompted his remark. It was a couple evenings after the refusion -- he had been talking to Jim in the Admiral's room -- one of the few times he and Jim had been alone together since their arrival on Vulcan. Scotty and Chekov were tinkering in the ship, as usual; Uhura and Sulu were out at some local Vulcan museum, and Spock was supposed



to be resting, although McCoy had fully expected what in fact happened an hour or so after he himself had dropped in on Jim: the door opened and Spock entered.



"I'm not tired," Spock stated flatly, as soon as McCoy opened his mouth. He sat down beside Jim, and listened absently to the rather nonsensical, bantering conversation between his two friends. They had been reminiscing, and had somehow got on to the Scalosians. Jim was joking about the effects of Scalorian water on one's perception of warp drive, then turned to Spock, saying,

"Speaking of perception, what's the drama we're invited to attend?"

Spock stared at him curiously. "You look remarkably tired," he commented. "Is anything wrong?"

Jim threw a glance at McCoy. "Had a busy week," he answered.

"Hmm." Spock was thoughtful for a moment. "Then it is just as well that we are off duty." He looked out of the window at the stark Vulcan landscape. "Not your idea of shore leave, is it Doctor?" he remarked with a brief smile.

McCoy felt a prick of concern. "Not really," he said slowly, "Are you all right, Spock?"

"No, Doctor. I am not all right. I am extremely well... when are we going home?"

McCoy became instantly alert. "We are home, Spock. We're on Vulcan, remember?"

"I have no need to 'remember', Doctor, as I can see it out of the window. Nor was I aware that Vulcan is your home."

"Not my home, Spock. Yours."

Spock looked astonished. "Vulcan is not my home, Dr. McCoy," he explained patiently.

Jim, unnerved, unconsciously moved closer to him. "Well what do you mean, then?" he asked kindly, "Earth?"

Spock regarded his friends with disbelief. "Of course not," he said oddly. "No planet is 'home'. The Enterprise has always been my home."

McCoy saw the color drain from Jim's face. Spock apparently saw it too, for as McCoy watched in amazement, he raised a thin hand to Jim's cheek, as if to stop the process. He gave McCoy a worried look. "Something is wrong," he insisted.

"Bones," Jim whispered, turning frightened eyes to McCoy, "You did tell him... ?"

McCoy nodded. "Spock," he said gently, "The Enterprise is gone."

"No," Spock said childishly, "It is not." At this, Jim took Spock's hand in his own, and retreated into a silent, frozen misery.

"Spock," McCoy tried again, "The Enterprise is gone."

"I heard you the first time, Doctor. My hearing is unimpaired." He looked doubtfully at his friends, and stood up, seemingly disconcerted at their inability to understand. "This," he said emphatically, holding Jim's hand tightly, "is the Enterprise. And this," he added, placing his other hand on McCoy's shoulder to form a perfect triangle, "is the Enterprise."

Kirk shut his eyes.

McCoy, now visibly upset, made another attempt to restore Spock to normalcy. "Logically then," he asserted with firmness, "We are home."

Spock considered that for a while. "Yes," he said finally. His deep resonant voice took on a mournful quality. "A living machine," he whispered, "like V-ger." His eyes clouded. "It will never be gone... never... never..."

"Spock," Jim grasped his hand tightly, "Please..."

Spock's eyes cleared and he seemed to 'awaken'. (McCoy could only describe it to himself as such). He withdrew his hand from Jim's, inspected it with curiosity for a moment, then folded his arms. Turning to Jim, he announced in his usual style, "The drama to which you have been invited is highly symbolic, not particularly vibrant, but rather, almost hypnotic in its poetry. It will be presented in a mixture of Vulcan and Earthtongue, and my parents have suggested that..."

McCoy blinked and came out of his reverie. He looked at Sarek's worn, sensitive face. "I... I'd rather not give an example right now," he said apologetically.

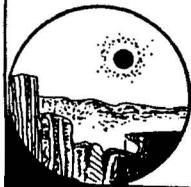
Sarek appeared to understand the doctor's dilemma. "As you wish."

"Anyhow," McCoy went on, "In general, he's his usual self: brilliant, reserved, logical. He... he doesn't seem to notice his own behavior."

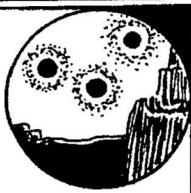
"I see," the Ambassador said quietly, "Can you explain this?"

"Well, yes, and no," McCoy said again, feeling that he was not being much help, "I think it's a mixture of things. You see, human nature being what it is, tends to balance things. Spock never had a human childhood, so he's having it now -- in little bits and pieces. He can have it now, because he knows what humanness means. He's seen us laugh, cry, rage, emote in all ways, and in an environment where those things are acceptable, in what we consider "appropriate circumstances". He's still very Vulcan -- he'll always be Vulcan -- but before he... died, he was coming to some understanding of what you mentioned a few hours ago -- his unique blend of two bloods. Stands to reason it's a little wonky right now. The two aren't meshing like they did, and what's more, it doesn't seem to bother him. His behavior, at the moment is a bit... unconventional. For a Vulcan, that is."

"It always has been," Sarek replied.



"Yes, well, it's a little unconventional for a human, at the moment," McCoy stated. "I don't know -- maybe this exchange of energy between Jim and Spock will do the trick -- I don't understand it -- I'm not sure I like it, but it seems to be right for them."



Sarek nodded. "Indeed," he said cryptically.

"You know," McCoy continued, "he's relearning everything. Maybe he's relearning it in a more balanced way. Your planet can provide him with all the information he needs -- he's at those computers more than I think is good for him, but his behavior patterns are not solely Vulcan now. I mean, when he first learned the ways of your people, he had no other models. Now he's got all of us around while he's being retrained into Vulcan ways. And he's got his own memories of many, many years with us surfacing all the time. It's bound to have some effect." McCoy scratched his head, and smiled at Sarek reassuringly. "He's got to go through it, you know. And none of us mind -- it's endearing, sort of, but he should not be thrust into public life in the near future. He needs time."

"Then he shall have it," Sarek replied.

McCoy gave him a baleful look and shook his head. "Sarek," he sighed, "It's not that simple." We've got to be back at Starfleet next week, if that rattletrap Klingon ship can stay in one piece until then."

"And?"

"And where Jim goes, Spock goes, plain and simple. I've already told Jim he's got to persuade Spock to stay behind, but, well, you know Jim. He sort of looks into the distance just over your shoulder and his ears snap shut. And that's that. And Spock's stubbornness is worse." He sighed glumly. "And now with the two of them interwoven or whatever the hell it is, that's not just double strength stubbornness, that's 210 stubbornness. No," he said resignedly, "Spock's going to be in public long before he should be. And Sarek, we will be court-martialled or disciplined -- especially Jim. How is Spock going to handle that?" He paused, and his face grew taut with anger. "And," he added bitterly, "Why should he have to?"

Sarek looked into the distance. "Questions," he said. "For Kirk it is 'what', for Spock it is 'how', for McCoy, it is 'why.' All are needed. They need your 'why.'"

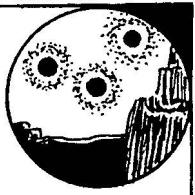
He reached into his robes and extracted a small seal, carved out of what looked like ruby. He held it carefully. "For you," he said. "It is the seal of Vulcan. He who carries it carries the key which will open all doors on this planet. What he asks will be granted -- sanctuary for himself and for those who accompany him. Provision, instruction, assistance. Protection, defense. It is given only to those Outworlders who hold peace in their hearts, as they hold their own blood. It was given to me for reasons we need not discuss. I give it to you... I entrust it to you, for your sake, and the sake of all your crew. As I was once the protector of those who were entrusted to me, so now do I ask you to assume this charge."

McCoy stared at him. "Sarek, I'm no Vulcan. I've always been against the whole Vulcan philosophy, well not the whole of it -- it's peaceful at any rate, but



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the... emotional suppression... upsets me, it really does. That Kolinahr business... if you could have seen Jim after Spock went off... he didn't even... oh what the hell... he at least had the sense to change his mind... but well, I just don't think I'm the... the logical choice."



"Which is precisely why I ask it of you, McCoy. Cultures must evolve. What Vulcans embrace as their philosophy was right when it was adopted. It has served our people well. Indeed," he added, looking remarkably like Spock, "It has been the cause of our continuance. But every philosophy has its lifespan. Static cultures do not endure. They destroy themselves, they rot. Amanda was right. It is time for Vulcan to learn from Earth -- not to abandon our ways, but to enlarge them... to learn what Spock has learned... that knowledge, and logic are not enough. Spock did not learn this from V-Ger, he learned it from you. It was within himself because of his oneness with Kirk, and his connection to you." For a moment, his eyes took on a faraway look. "One day," he said slowly, "Vulcans will look to Spock for guidance, as they have with all our family." His hands tightened around the glowing, ruddy seal. "I am not asking that you become Vulcan, McCoy, nor that you understand. Only that you nurture. It is that which you have always done."

McCoy smiled. "Well, when I stepped on board the Enterprise, I thought my mission in life was to heal the wounded, but when I met Spock, I knew my mission in life was to get him to realize that he had feelings."

"Perhaps that was the same mission," Sarek said sadly. "In Spock, I see the future of Vulcan. The balance of logic and feeling, both properly controlled. He is an example. But he must be helped. He must be reminded that what he was taught..." his voice trembled, "what I taught him... is not enough. Nurture this understanding in Spock -- in both of them -- and you nurture it in all of Vulcan. It is a start."

He leaned forward urgently. "Take care of him," he whispered. Then, drawing himself up with dignity, he added, "Please."

McCoy felt a lump in his throat. He swallowed with difficulty, and replied seriously, "Sarek, that's something no one has to ask me to do. But why ask me to do what you already do so well?"

Sarek raised his eyebrows wryly. "Why," he said, "Always why." He cupped his hands around the seal. "Because Vulcans, like their culture, cannot live beyond their allotted lifespan." He held out the seal to McCoy. "Many years ago, you gave me back my life. I did not thank you then. I do so now."

McCoy took the seal uncertainly. He was very touched, and very puzzled. "How will I know when to use it?" He asked.

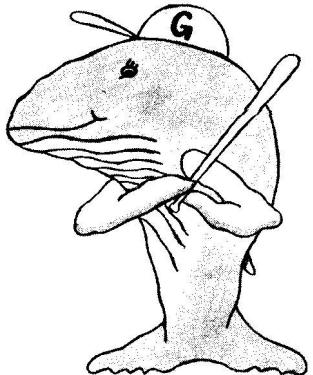
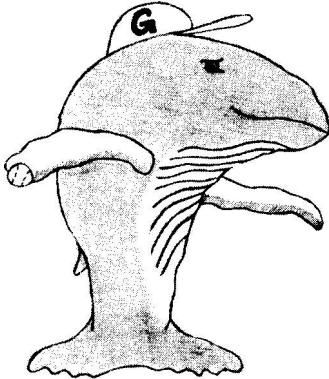
"You will know," Sarek replied.

When Spock and Jim returned some time later, they found Sarek and McCoy deep in discussion of planetary evolution. Jim smiled at Bones. "I won." he said smugly.

"Indeed," confirmed Spock. "The Admiral excels at two-dimensional strategy." He turned to his father. "And now?" he asked.

"Now, gentlemen, we prepare the Starfleet strategy," Sarek said.

GRACIE AT THE BAT

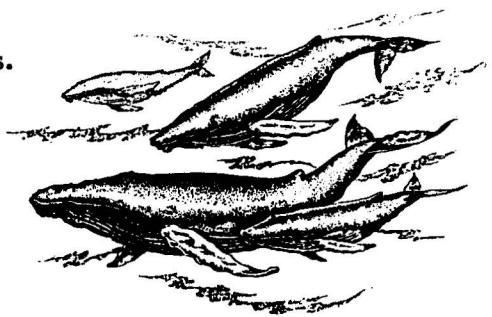


*Art and Poetry
by Cheryl Zier*

The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Starship crew that day.
They couldn't leave the Enterprise but neither could they stay.
So when Kirk punched in the secret code, the others did the same,
And a pallor wreathed their features with a grief no one could name.
The straggling few got up to go to Vulcan with the rest,
For despite their loss they still had yet to face a harsher test.
They thought "If only Starfleet could but understand the end
Might justify the means when you are trying to save a friend."
But law preceded honor, so with grim determination,
They took the Bounty up and went to face the Federation.
So upon that stricken multitude a deathlike silence took
For there seemed but little chance of Jim Kirk's getting off the hook.
But something wouldn't let them land to make sincere amends.
A probe from far-off space had come to contact long-lost friends.
And as the clouds were gath'ring and they saw what had occurred,
They took a desperate swing around the sun to save their world.
Back they went three hundred years in a stolen Klingon wreck,
It rumbled in the moorings and it rattled on the deck.
But with all the knocking they still somehow made it through,
For Gracie, mighty Gracie, was the reason that they flew.



There was tension in Kirk's manner as he asked about the place,
There was pride in Leonard's bearing and a smile on Spock's face.
And, when responding, he said "Earth, late twentieth century,"
They knew that they had found the time where Gracie and George would be.
Ten thousand eyes were on them, and so that no one would ask,
They cloaked and landed by the bay, and set about their task.
Then while the others looked for wind to fill the Bounty's sails,
Spock and Kirk went off to seek a special pair of whales.
That's when they met with Gillian, the one they had to thank,
As they stood there watching their salvation swimming in a tank.
Close by the sturdy guardrail Spock stood waiting for his chance,
"That suits my style," said Gracie when he told her of their plans.
From the future, black with storm clouds, Sarek sent a muffled prayer,
Through the beating of the waves he knew his son would save those there.
"Bring them! Bring them both!" he shouted through the strong typhoon,
And it's likely they'd gone faster had not the whales been loosed too soon.
But with a dropping of the cloak the Bounty stood above the sea.
They stilled the whaling vessel so they'd let the whales go free.
Kirk signalled fast to Sulu, and once more the ship took flight,
Ignoring all the risks they went ahead to join the fight.
"Hey!" cried the frightened thousands, and the echo answered "Hey!"
They looked into the sky and saw the probe had gone away.
But the joyous celebration lasted only a short while,
With things now back to normal Kirk had yet to face his trial.
The smile had gone now from his lips, the smile had left his eyes,
Until they named him Captain and restored the Enterprise.
And now they're out there somewhere, sailing free across the sky,
In their brilliant silver lady, in among the stars they fly.
Somewhere on this Earth, because of them, the sun is bright,
The whales are singing here now, and that's why hearts are light.
And Kirk has been forgiven for his multitude of sins,
Because there's joy in Frisco -- mighty Gracie has had twins.



The Ways of Spock

by: Ellen Morris

art: Gina Godwin

What do you see
as you gaze across the Vulcan desert
high above us all?
I fear I shall never know you again
as I knew you once,
my Vulcan friend.
And I wait
as the days pass,
longing to see you .
truly born once more;
Yourself, as I have known you:
Intellect tempered by compassion,
Discipline softened by empathy,
Logic balanced by love.
Where, I wonder,
does your true self sleep
while you learn to live again?

Studying the severe harshness of the Forge
I fear your soul appears thus inside you:
barren, silent,
severe.
Hopeless.
Come let us teach you
not the ways of Vulcan or Earth,
but the ways of Spock,
that you might find
an oasis in that desert
where the waters taste of
friendship and honesty,
an oasis where
you might drink of this knowledge
and find yourself once more.





LOG ENTRIES

by: Ginna LaCroix

art: Chris Soto

Show me a hero, and I will write you a tragedy.

-- F. Scott Fitzgerald

The bright Vulcan sun was finally setting, turning the sky a deep red. Admiral James T. Kirk wearily closed the door behind him, closing himself away from the world that embraced his exile, and held him prisoner.

He took off his jacket and threw it toward a chair, not bothering to notice if it hit its mark. His attention was held by the sight framed in the window, still shimmering in the intense heat left from the planet's baking sun. He knew in a few hours that heat would turn to bone-chilling cold... the kind of cold that was now in possession of his heart.

He stood, gazing out the window, looking at the alien ship that would, tomorrow, take them home... take them to Earth... take them to... what? The light gradually faded, taking the image of the ship with it. No soft, welcoming moon would rise to bathe it in glowing light. The night would be as black and sightless as his soul.

He finally took a deep breath and turned away, moving to the small desk at the far side of the room. He looked at the recorder that was sitting there, then reached out and turned it on.

"Personal log, Stardate 8390. Admiral James T. Kirk recording."

He smiled at the words. "I wonder how long the title of 'Admiral' will apply. I have no future in Starfleet. From the cadets ranks up, one is made aware of the importance of obeying orders. Starfleet might overlook small infractions, but breaking a Federation prisoner out of jail? Disobeying Morrow's direct orders? Stealing a starship... destroying the Enterprise?"

He shook his head at what was only a partial list of what had occurred. They would hand his head to him. His life in space was over. His life as a free man could also be well over. He got to his feet and started pacing the room.

"I can't go on like this -- a man without a world. Vulcan has made us welcome, but it is no place to live. It's too different, too inhospitable. Without Spock...."

He hesitated, his eyes going to the darkened window. No, he must not keep dreaming of what would never be. He started pacing again.

"I know McCoy's worried about me, keeps trying to get me to talk, but what's the use? I needed Spock, and I gave everything to get him back...." His voice died away and he stood silent, hands clenched into fists. After a minute, he found the courage to start again.

"I lived for Starfleet, yet went against them because of him. How many years did I strive for the command of a starship... then I destroyed her..." Kirk ran his hand through his hair, then shook his head. "McCoy's wrong this time. What good would talking about it do? She's gone, David's dead...." His voice caught and he felt the wetness spring to his eyes. "No!" he said in a low, fierce voice. "If I refuse to talk, I refuse to cry. The hurt is my own, caused by me. I'll have plenty of years behind bars to empty my soul."

He slowly sat down on the narrow bed. "I could accept everything that happened if I had Spock, but I don't. I've lived in hell for three months, praying that he'd remember, but he hasn't. Yet...." Kirk got to his feet, his restless energy not allowing him peace. "It happened again today. I knew, even when I was by the ship talking to the others, I knew he was there. Then, when I looked up..." He paused, his eyes growing unfocused.

"It's happening both ways. Something draws me to him, just as it seems to draw him to me. Whenever I'm most troubled, he's there, standing apart, watching me. I find myself doing the same; and yet, when we meet, I can't speak, can't allow myself to release all this pain. So, like him, I stand apart, sending out a silent cry for help, for understanding, and finding neither."

"Is it the same thing which draws him to me? The few times we've spoken, he's been politely correct, yet so distant... and cold. Yet so often his eyes have looked puzzled when I catch him watching me. Is there some memory there? Is it insane to keep up hope after so long a time?"

Kirk stood staring into the distance for a few minutes, then starting pacing again. "I feel I should pack some belongings for this trip to nowhere, but I don't have anything -- just one suit of clothing. Not much to show for a retiring Admiral.... I hope they're not too hard on the others. They were following my lead... they've always followed my lead... Spock used to....

"Saavik's staying here, thank god. I know she worshipped the ground Spock walked on... probably still does, but when I see her, all I can think of is that she's alive, and David isn't. Perhaps he did give his life so others might live, but she's Starfleet trained and, as such, was in charge of everyone down on Genesis. He was a scientist, not a fighter. If she had done her job, I might still have a son...."

Again his voice caught in his throat. "No," he said huskily, "it's not fair to take it out on her... nor is it logical," he added with a lopsided grin. He took a deep breath. "I need Spock. How I need him now and how much more I will need him when I'm forced to stand in front of Starfleet!" He walked to the window and rested his hand on the now cool glass. "But my friend won't be there. Vulcan has finally taken him and made him in her image. There's no trace of the Human left in him, no vestiges of the friend I knew. He will stay on this hell hole he calls home, alive, logical to the end, and lost to me forever. I know his life was worth the price I had to pay, but he has taught me so well that a half will never make a whole...."

Hope is independent of the apparatus of logic.

-- Norman Cousins

A white robed figure moved from the shadowed darkness where he had been standing motionless, watching the Human framed in the lighted window. He walked swiftly along well known pathways which led to his parents' home. He did not take the time to pause and look around, even though he would be leaving this place the next day. Nostalgia had no place in Vulcan life.

He reached his rooms without meeting anyone, which left him feeling relieved, although he could not say why. He took off his outer robe and neatly folded it, then moved to a small recording device. He found himself making a verbal record of his daily activities. He did not remember the reason he had for doing so; he only remembered that it was something he did.

"Spock. Personal log. Stardate 8390.

"I was drawn to him twice today, once in early afternoon, and again tonight. I do not understand why this should be, nor why, at times when I least expect it, I have looked up to find him standing there staring at me.

"Father has explained what he is to me... my commander, and a friend. The former I understand, although I was quick to point out that his current rank is Admiral...." Spock hesitated for a moment. "I do not understand why my words would darken my father's features, as though there was something terribly wrong.

"But a friend?"

"Today was the ultimate, important testing of my restored memory, for which I have studied so hard, yet, in the middle of everything, I simply walked away, drawn yet again by a tie as strong as it is invisible. He was there by the Klingon Bird of Prey... with them. I knew he knew I was there, yet he didn't look up at first, but waited until the others had left... until there was just him... and me. Even from the height on which I stood, I could see his face. I felt a tightness within me that defies explanation... and it has left me even more uneasy.

"Mother also spoke of these Humans as friends. I understand the definition of the word, but even that does not explain what she said they did because of me. No, I amend that... what he did for me.

"Why is he so different? The others risked as much, yet why do I feel they risked all because of the man he is and what he means to them, rather than their feelings for me.

"But what should he mean to me?" Spock stood looking down at the recorder, his brow furrowed in thought.

"I have no memory of who I am, of who he is," Spock said finally. "I know the history of what brought me to this moment, but so much is missing. When I see him there, staring at me, there is an indefinable something in his eyes, just as there is an answering response within the core of my being. I do not know what it is, but I know it must be ignored as it has a negative effect on my efficiency.

"Is this perhaps a stirring of the feelings that mother says I possess? A feeling is an emotion, and emotions are to be controlled, yet I cannot control this response to him."

Spock stared out into the darkness of the night for a while, then continued. "I leave for Earth tomorrow. I think it important that Starfleet hear my words. He does not appear to know that I am going with him. I know Dr. McCoy has been informing him of my progress; the healers have been working very closely with the doctor because of his understanding of my physical makeup. I sense disapproval when McCoy is near, and I would think he has taken a negative report of my recovery to the Admiral. Why else would Admiral Kirk have been talking today with the others, and excluding me? Perhaps he does not wish me to return to Earth with them...." Spock fell silent, thinking about his words.

"I have spoken with Lt. Saavik, and she will remain here on Vulcan to complete her studies of our culture. She appears to be close to me in a way I do not understand. I often find her following me, as I find myself following him.

"It is for him that I made the request that she stay behind. I do not understand why it is that he is uncomfortable in her presence, but it is enough that he is, and it is a distraction he does not need, knowing what faces him back on Earth. Perhaps one day he will talk about the events which transpired during my rescue. Father has told me of them, but he was not there -- the Admiral was. I have a natural curiosity concerning these events, although I am not sure why. Perhaps in discovering more about this man, I will resolve this empty feeling I carry within me..."

The three men walked in silence down the long corridor. The two security guards kept their eyes straight ahead while Kirk tried to keep some air of dignity as he squelched along between them, leaving wet footprints as he walked.

There was no doubt that he was under arrest. From the instant the shuttle had landed back at Starfleet Headquarters after plucking them out of San Francisco Bay, he had been separated from the others. He had objected loudly, but was told it was by order of the High Command.

So he had gone with them. Kirk had known from the moment that he decided to return to Earth that something like this would happen, but back on Vulcan, it hadn't mattered. Back then, just barely more than twenty-four hours earlier by 23rd century time, he had no reason left for caring about his future.

But now he had.

Now he had Spock... whole and complete... Vulcan and Human. He had found his friend... his other half.

As Kirk moved along the corridor, he remembered Spock's face as the security detail separated them. The stricken look was almost the same one that he had seen on his own face in the tapes... when he first saw what the radiation exposure had done to Spock.

He could not say anything to the Vulcan... he couldn't speak. He only knew he did not look away until the guards had firmly led him around a turn, and Spock was no longer in sight.

The guards stopped by a door at the end of the corridor. One inserted a coded key into the lock and the door slid open. "Sir," he said, motioning to Kirk that he was to proceed into the room.

"You two going to keep me company?" Kirk asked with an ironic smile.

The guards glanced at each other. "We'll be out here, sir. It was thought you might like this time to yourself."

"I'd rather be with my friends."

"Sorry, sir, we have our orders."

Kirk nodded. "I won't be any trouble. I'm sorry to be the one to keep you up all night." He walked into the room, and the door slid shut behind him. He quietly tested it, but it would remain locked. Step one to his loss of freedom.

Suddenly aware of his soaking wet clothes, he shivered slightly. He looked around at the rather plush quarters. He might be a prisoner, but they were not condemning him to only bread and water, at least not yet. He walked into the bedroom, where he found a robe, plus a Starfleet uniform hanging in the closet, admiral's stripes still in place.

"Maybe they're planning the classic ripping off of rank insignia," he said softly, fingering the uniform. He shivered again, and he wasn't sure if it was entirely from the cold. He grabbed the robe and headed for the shower, stripping as he went, leaving a trail of wet clothing behind. He stepped into the shower and turned the water on as high as it would go, leaning into the scalding steam until his skin was scorched a glowing red under the bronze tan.

He finally got out and scrubbed himself dry. It had been very cold in the Bay, a cold he had not felt until now. Back there they had been savoring the victory of an impossible gamble -- the whales had been frolicking, and Spock had been in his arms, laughing as hard as he was... as they all were.

Kirk pulled on the robe and walked back into the main room, his mind far away. So many things had happened, but one was uppermost in his mind....

Spock.... Kirk stood looking out the window, the lights of San Francisco bright in the distance. It was a city in which, three centuries earlier, he had once again found a friend.

The future once more had promise... a future he no longer controlled.

As he turned away from the window, he noticed the small recorder on the desk and smiled slightly. Starfleet obviously was willing to provide him with those things he was used to... at least until his court-martial....

He reached out and switched it on. "Personal log. Admiral James T. Kirk. Stardate 8390.1.

"Twenty-four hours ago, I had little reason to worry about such trivial things as my future, but a lifetime has passed since then -- a lifetime which apparently has saved a world... and given me a reason to live."

He turned and walked slowly around the room. "I had lost Spock. I had lost him so completely that I no longer cared what happened to me. I've never felt like that before in my life -- not even when he died. When I thought he was dead, there was only an empty void. But those months on Vulcan when he was there, alive, but so different, so unapproachable.... I had lost so much, but that loss paled in the face of what I no longer shared with him. It's hard to believe that one person can make such a difference, have such an impact...."

Kirk traced the outline of a chair with his fingertips, trying to collect his thoughts, wanting to say not just what was important, but also to sort out his own feelings. He had been on an emotional roller coaster for so long that now nothing seemed real.

"I didn't know Spock was coming back with us. McCoy's reports had been pretty negative, and my few contacts with Spock made me feel that the further away from the human race he was, the happier he'd be!

"McCoy was upset that I let Spock come, but he also knew better than to argue. Guess I had one of my better stubborn looks on my face. Poor Bones, I've put him through such hell these past months... and I can't explain it to him.

"But, without Spock, I wouldn't be standing here now recording this. Without him, I wouldn't want to be.... "

Kirk walked over to the window and looked out. "San Francisco...." He shook his head, a slight smile on his face. "What havoc did we cause back there, and how much did we change the future? We didn't have time to find out, and we'll probably never know. There was once a time I would have died before I would do such a thing, but back then I had him at my side, and all things seemed possible.

"Who was at my side this time? A man I once knew... a steady, logical presence who turned out to be the biggest pain in the butt I've ever been with! I never thought honesty could cause so much havoc and confusion!"

Kirk chuckled as he turned from the window. "Trust Spock to get down to the heart of the matter by going straight to the whales themselves. How he got away with it without getting us arrested... and with swearing at Gillian like that... "

He sobered as he sat down. "Gillian.... We brought her to the 23rd century.... Years ago we did exhaustive research on Captain Christopher to make sure we did nothing to upset the balance of history, yet we brought her back here with hardly a thought. I could have beamed her back into the park... I should have, but... but I didn't want to," he finished softly.

"What was I reaching out for? She was looking at me like... like Spock used to? Was that it? Was I being that selfish? I didn't have much time to explain to our welcoming committee who she was, but Spock said he would take care of it.

"It has to be left in his hands. He's the only one not under arrest...."

He ran his hands over his face. "I tried everything I could to reach Spock. I wonder what it was that finally touched the hidden core of his being? I only know that when everything was going wrong, he was suddenly there... not the logical Vulcan, not the loyal First Officer, but my friend... the friend who knew how I was being torn apart inside... and who told me it was permissible to feel.

It is the Human thing to do.

I wonder if he realizes how close I came to crying at that moment. He had been babbling about logic and failed missions and colorful metaphors until I was ready to shake him silly. Then he was there... as if he had never left... our visions again one."

Kirk felt his eyes fill, but did nothing to brush away the tears which balanced on the thick lashes before slowly trickling down his face. "I never had a chance to welcome him back. On Vulcan, it wasn't Spock, then things were happening so fast.... I want to tell him about the **Enterprise**, about David, about what I feel for him, but I'm locked away here, and god knows where they've taken him..."

"If they would just give **me** one damn minute!"

Spock was shrugging back into his robe when Commander Suter walked into the room. "Well, Captain Spock, for a man who by Starfleet records has been pronounced dead, you are remarkably fit."

Spock stared at the young Vulcan doctor, no hint of expression showing on his face. "I was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time," he answered blandly.

Sutar looked at him oddly, then nodded. "Your physical shows nothing to be out of order. I shall, of course, send the report on to the Surgeon General, but I see nothing to stop you from resuming your duties as soon as you wish."

"Thank you, Doctor," Spock said. He had not wanted to undergo the exhaustive and probing physical, but knew it was a necessity. He wanted to be on the active duty roster when Kirk stood up to face the charges against him, so he had submitted to the physical without protest. "Will there be anything else?"

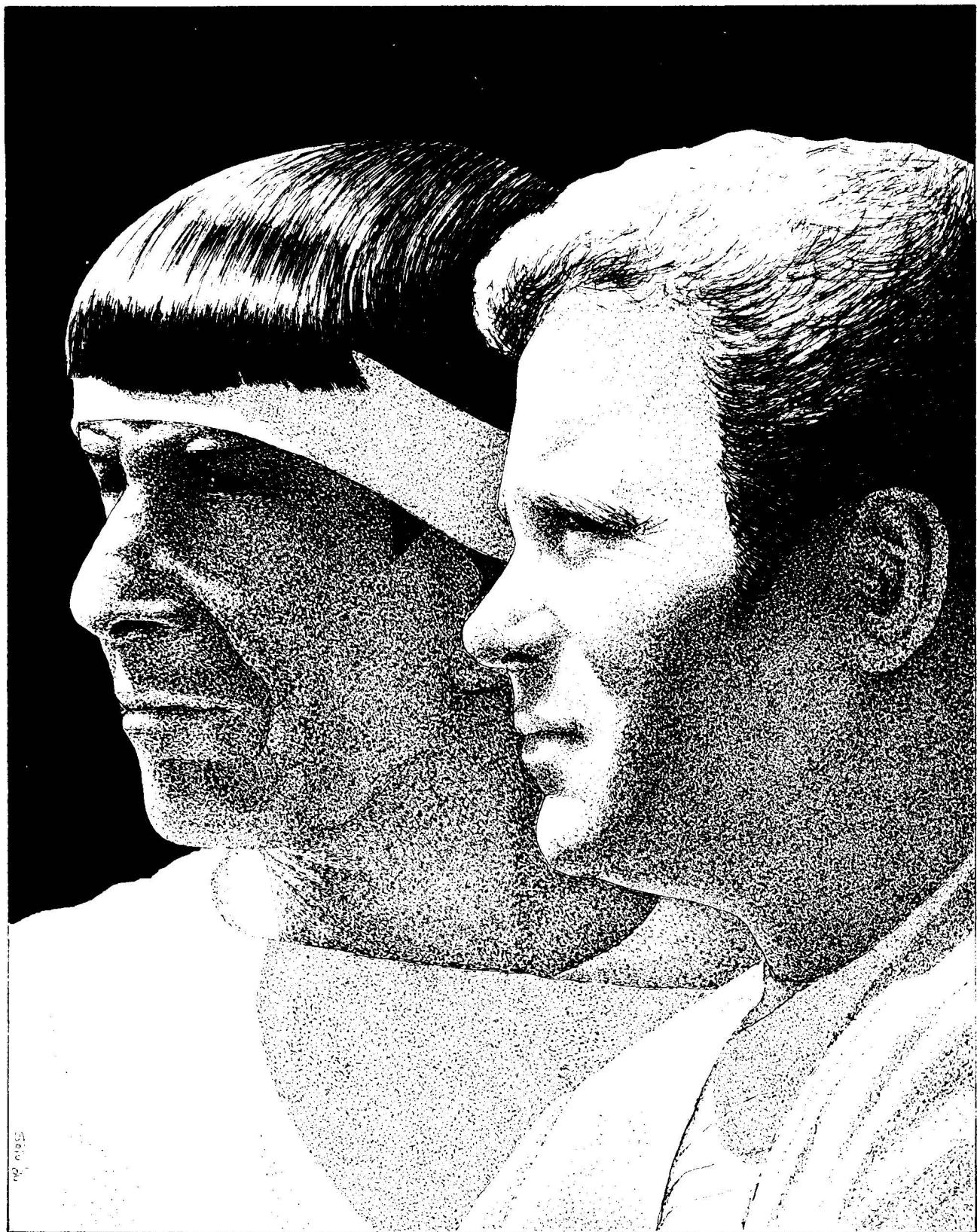
"No. Would you like someone to escort you to...."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "Doctor, I have full command of my faculties. I believe I can find my way around a complex where I was a student before you were even born."

The Vulcan flushed green, and Spock instantly regretted his words. His human half was getting back at him for the months it had been forced to lie dormant! However, he wasn't in the mood to try to explain. He simply nodded and left.

He walked out of the medical complex, and out of Starfleet Headquarters. He needed to get away, to be alone for a while, and he knew the one place he could go to find that kind of solitude.

The door to Kirk's apartment slid open at his touch -- Kirk had not changed the palm release lock. He walked into the strange familiarity of Kirk's home. Spock looked around, taking a minute to savor those things which Kirk loved, then moved to look out the window at the peaceful scene below. The waters of the Bay were serenely lapping at the shore, so different from those in which they had crash-landed only hours before.



He turned away and went into the spare bedroom that he had, in the past, so often used as his own, bringing out a small personal log recorder. A lot had happened in the last twenty-four hours and he desperately needed to talk to Kirk, but the Admiral was being held in isolation. Spock stared at the small recorder feeling, for the first time in his life, real dislike of a mechanical device. He finally switched it on.

"Spock. Personal Log. Stardate 8390.1.

"I feel compelled to talk tonight, to say things which should only be said to Admiral Kirk, but, since that is impossible, this device will have to suffice, as I feel it important to express my new-found emotions.

"I feel. ..." Spock's voice died away. He again stared out the large window at the waters of the Bay. "Twenty-four hours ago, I did not understand what that word meant," he continued softly. "I had forgotten about emotion, along with its hopes and fears. I had forgotten about susceptibility; sympathy; readiness to feel; tenderness for others; conviction not based solely on reason; sentiment; intuitive belief....

"I am describing what I most value in Admiral Kirk... those traits that make him the man he is... the man I follow... the friend I cherish."

Spock got up and walked slowly around the room, then stopped and lifted a hologram of Kirk, taken the day he had received command of his first starship -- the *Enterprise*. "It took years for me to understand him, and I doubt if I ever would have, had he not so stubbornly forced me to understand myself.

"Stubbornness... is that what made him hold out against all odds? I was dead... yet he came. On this last mission, I was not myself, yet he kept me by his side.

"I do not remember why I felt it was so important that I return to Earth with him. Was it to stand up and testify at his court-martial, as I told my mother, or, even without understanding it, knowing that my place was at his side?

"I watched him during that voyage, even as McCoy watched me. The Admiral was a baffling stranger, yet so familiar. He wanted me to call him Jim. How could I? I did not know him anymore than I knew myself.

"Yet he trusted me. I was the one who went with 'Team Leader'. Maybe it only proved that old habits die hard. I did not provide a great deal of assistance.

"I knew only what Vulcan had taught me, yet, for some reason, I was very aware of how he reacted to me. I had not seen him angry, yet I sorely tried his patience until he had no more left. I did not understand at first... his reaction to my contacting the whales... I am still not certain what he meant when he stated I did not understand the use of colorful metaphors, but I felt his frustration whenever I mentioned them.

"I knew I could not go to dinner with Dr. Taylor. My presence was causing him a certain amount of agitation. I suspect it had something to do with what he called my honesty.

"I felt only confusion when I beamed back to the Bird of Prey... confusion caused by him. Then he was back, and an innocent remark from me caused him to throw the dagger that opened my heart.

You're half Human. Haven't you got any goddamn feelings about that?

He is a man with deep feelings.

"How could I have forgotten that? How could I tell him I remembered? I was coming to tell him, trying to think of some logical thing to say, but Dr. Taylor was there, so I merely reported that full power had been restored.

"I had not realized how much of a coward I am.

"Then, suddenly, he needed support for a decision he had already made in his heart and, as once before, only I could provide what he truly needed.

A ship runs on loyalty to one man and nothing can replace it — or him.

Is that the logical thing to do, Spock?

No, but it is the human thing to do.

"I remember in both cases how his eyes filled, and his smile... and I knew he had received the message that came from my heart.

"And now? I know only that I will stand by his side at his trial... and beyond.... "

The giant starship was warping silently through the dark vastness of space. She was ready to take the place of one of the greatest starships that had ever flown... commanded by one of the best that Starfleet had ever produced.

The two men stopped at Kirk's quarters. Spock stood looking at his Captain. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked, the concern sounding strong in his voice.

Kirk nodded. "I'm starting to do what McCoy has been after me to do for the past three months." He smiled slightly. "I'm fine, Spock. We humans just need to release our emotions occasionally."

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly, and he did not look completely convinced. "If you are sure," he said dubiously.

"I'm sure," Kirk answered. He searched the Vulcan's face as though he was trying to memorize it. "We'd better turn in," he said finally, reluctantly. "We've got a ship to run."

Spock nodded slightly. "Then I shall take my leave of you, Captain."

The tears started as the door shut behind Kirk. He leaned back against the solid frame, biting his lower lip until he was finally able to control them. Eventually he straightened up and looked around his quarters, the quarters he had not even been in before this moment. His belongings had been sent up from San Francisco and were piled in boxes all over the floor. His yeoman had, he noticed, made the bed.

He drew in a shaky breath, then walking forward to his desk, leaned over and activated the computer. "Personal log, Admi ... ah, amend that, Captain James T. Kirk recording.

"My life appears to have come full circle.

"The court-martial, such as it was, has become a blur in my memory... so much tension... the shame of demotion, the pain of seeing my life's work falling in front of my eyes. The only thing that held me together was Spock standing by my side. Somehow I knew he would be. Although there had been no time to talk, no chance to see each other, I never really had the feeling I was completely alone.

"I felt little reaction to the President's words. I was only aware of Spock watching me as the man talked, and knowing that I couldn't return his look. I could remain in control only if I stared straight ahead, thinking of nothing.

"Then the words were spoken... **the command of a starship!** After that, everything else was a dream -- except for Spock. When I turned, he was there, and everything that needed to be said, was said in that look.

"That look was there again when we flew through the spacedock and suddenly my silver lady was there in front of us.... Spock's look said that he knew what I was feeling, and that he understood.

"1701-A. ... I had heard rumors a new starship was being built, but the *Excelsior* was all the rage. The beauty and the bathtub... I wonder how close we really came to inheriting the latter? Probably pretty close before Scotty disabled her."

Kirk reached out, touching the room's panelled wall, and felt the slight vibration caused by the ship's massive engines. "A new command... a new ship. How many hundreds of years has an *Enterprise* served her master? I thought my gallant lady would be the last when she gave her life.... Yet it was another *Enterprise* who gave some of her life-blood so we could return from the 21st century to save her future namesake, and those who would fly on her.

"I walked her decks tonight. How many other times have I done that?" He smiled slightly. It was impossible to know. "Spock walked with me tonight. ..." Kirk felt his eyes fill up with tears again and turned away, impatiently shaking his head.

"We ended up in the Officer's Lounge. No one else was there... just the two of us. It's hard to believe, but it was the first time we had been alone together since we returned to our own Earth.

"We just stood there staring at each other, neither of us knowing what to say, or how to say it. I finally turned and looked out at the stars. His image was there in the transparency, looking at me. I found it easier to talk to that image than to him.

"I surprised myself by apologizing to him... I think he was just as shocked. Of all the things I could have said... 'I missed you'... 'I love you'... they were forgotten. All I could say was that I was sorry. ...

"He gave his life to save us... to save the ship... to save me. Now she's gone, a blazing star in memory's sky. Was that worth a life? Didn't I betray his sacrifice?

"I told all about my bitterness, my confusion, and my loss, and he stood in silence, watching me in the transparency, surrounded by a field of stars.

"It wasn't until I got to David that I turned. Spock never really knew him. Neither did I, but he was my son, and the universe wasn't planned to have a son die before his father.

"Finally I stood in front of Spock, more vulnerable than I've ever felt before in my life. I had poured out my soul... I had nothing left.

"His eyes never left me. He stood looking at me in silence until I thought I would scream. Then he walked forward, and raised his hand to my face.

Jim, I'm sorry.

"Three words, that's all he said. Three words -- and I was wrapped in the warm strength of his arms. I almost cried then... as I'm crying now," he added with a slight smile as he brushed away fresh tears.

"We have more to talk about, to sort out, but we've got eternity ahead of us now. The ultimate sacrifice was made, and we've both burned in the fires of hell. Somehow we've managed to come out the other side and have, indeed, come home. ... "

Spock walked into his own quarters after watching the door close behind Kirk. He was concerned about leaving his Captain alone, but Kirk seemed to want the time to himself, so he would honor that wish.

As in Kirk's quarters, there were boxes full of personal belongings littering the floor. Spock stepped over them and went into the bedroom, removing his Starfleet uniform, replacing it with the more comfortable meditation robe.

But he knew he would not meditate. Too much had happened... his emotions were too much on edge. He lit the firepot, then sat down on the side of the bed and watched as the flames danced along the darkened wall.

Flame... a soothing red, flecked with gold. Hazel eyes... also flecked with gold.

Spock shook his head, then stood up and walked into the next room. Once again he felt compelled to talk, but tonight was too soon for Kirk. He had scars Spock had not even guessed were there, and they needed time to heal. He would make a log entry, and one day leave it for Kirk to hear, so he would understand.

"Spock. Personal Log.

"Much has happened since my last entry. I was pleased that my father supported me when I explained I would be standing with Kirk at his trial. I am sure Sarek understands my reasons far more than he should, but he did not explain how he knew, nor did I ask.

"So I stood beside the Admiral, feeling my tension rise as the charges were read and I began to fully understand what my shipmates had done... what he had done. ...

"That the charges were dropped was logical. That he was more than willing to accept sole blame for what happened only underlined the man he is.

"Kirk's demotion sent a shockwave through my being, yet he stood in silent acceptance, his career seemingly in ruins at his feet... his world shattered even worse than before. Our world. ...

"Then, suddenly, they were reaffirming something that once had taken great courage for me to say --

Accepting promotion was a mistake. Commanding a starship is your first, best destiny....

"Did he believe me then? The President of the Council said it to Kirk again -- ... to return to those duties for which you have repeatedly demonstrated unswerving ability: the command of a starship.

"I knew instantly it was not just going to be any starship. Father had told me of the new **Enterprise**, but I never thought she should be ours again, not until that moment.

"We turned and, for a moment, for an eternity, our eyes met. Words were unnecessary. Our lives were once again ours to control. Then everyone else was there, wanting to share in the celebration.

"Later, the others were typically bickering as our small craft flew through the spacedock. Kirk was quiet, but I could feel his tension rise as the **Excelsior** drew near. All eyes were glued ahead as we flew over her... all but mine. I was watching him as he caught the first sight of her. At that moment, he had indeed come home.

"There was just one thing left, and tonight we started to heal those wounds. I know humans well enough to understand their need to release emotion... and his had been held too long. All the pain, all the death....

"So I listened in silence. I could offer nothing... only time can heal all that he has suffered.

"Except for one thing.... I was no longer a stranger to myself. Kirk had said it -- I am half Human and, thanks to him, I now have very strong goddamned feelings about that! As he stood there, stripped bare and vulnerable in his pain, I understood him more than I ever had before in my life, and knew he desperately needed me, just as I needed him.

"So I reached out as he had taught me and, because I now know who I am, I also know who he is and what he means to me. So I responded as he had wanted me to, my words an apology for the pain I had caused.

Jim, I'm sorry.

"His look told me that he understood as I opened my arms and welcomed him home."



MEDICAL LOGS

by: Sandy Zier

Leonard McCoy had reluctantly given his affirmative vote to the question of whether or not to return to Earth. The reluctance was not a result of not wanting to face a trial; but came from a physician concerned about his patients' well-being. Not to mention, of course, his own feelings of apprehension as to his future — a future he was not sure he was looking forward to. Since the refusion he had been somewhat skeptical of his own abilities. After all, the refusion was something the Vulcans knew little about themselves. How could they possibly know the effects it would have on a human. He picked up his recorder to continue the log he had been keeping since their arrival on Vulcan.

"Personal Log, Stardate 8390, Dr. Leonard McCoy recording. We leave tomorrow for Earth — to face the 'consequences' as Jim put it. I wonder what those consequences will be? Can't honestly say I'm looking forward to it. In fact, I'm downright scared. I hate to think of what they could do to me — to us. They'll for sure separate all of us — not only from each other — but from the life we love. For me that life is medicine. What kind of life will there be if I lose the privilege of healing others?

Spock insists he will accompany us to testify, though I'm against the idea. He has been molded into the Vulcan he, at one time, proclaimed himself to be — and more. I'm not sure he's ready for the stress of life outside the confines of Vulcan. I've put off telling Jim that Spock intends to return with us because I am hoping Spock will change his mind; though I have my doubts. I'm not sure how Jim will be able to handle Spock being there during the court-martial — this may be the one time he may do better without Spock at his side.

I, myself am still recovering from the refusion, at times I feel lightheaded — but the Vulcan healers assure me that, with time, those feelings will pass." McCoy paused to take a long breath, then continued. "Dammit — Vulcan healers can't be sure I'm going to be all right. Will my mental faculties be affected later on? How could they possibly know whether the refusion was complete and, what if it wasn't? What will happen to me — and to Spock — then?

I haven't told Jim about these lapses I've been having. He's been through too much already. The Admiral has been hurting, yet he refuses to talk about what he is feeling. He has suffered more in the past several months than any human should be

asked to bear. Spock, if he accompanies us, will only serve as a reminder of his most painful loss -- the loss of his best friend."

"Kirk lived for Starfleet... he thrived on command. Yet now he... and all of us... stand to lose our careers because we did what we truly felt was right. It was right not only for us... but for Jim -- for both of them. We did it because of what Jim means to all of us -- and we all know he isn't whole without Spock. And still, as yet, we... Jim... does not have Spock back.

"I feel the loss as well. The experience of carrying Spock's katra has helped me understand him -- or rather understand the way he used to be. Losing Spock to a strict Vulcan regime is difficult enough. Add to that the feeling that I am losing Jim as well..." McCoy hesitated. He wanted things back the way they were. But as time went on, he realized, the probability of that happening was pretty slim.

"Who knows all the charges we'll be facing -- or if we'll see each other again after the trial." Of course, McCoy thought to himself, that wreck the Klingons call a ship may or may not get us back. "There won't be any miracle this time -- everyone has pretty well accepted that as fact... that is, everyone except the Admiral."

"He is still hoping for Spock to come back to him. They do seem to be drawn to each other -- or is that my imagination? Spock was there today, watching Jim. What was he thinking? And why did he turn away when Jim looked up at him? There are too damn many unanswered questions. And so little time left to find the answers..."

"Spock hasn't found himself yet -- and until he does he will not be able to allow his feelings to emerge again. They are buried too deep. I'm sure that if there is any chance at all of breaking through the Vulcan shield of logic that has now encompassed Spock, that the Admiral is the one who can do it."

McCoy paused, remembering how things used to be. His constant prodding at the Vulcan to bring out his human side, his irritation when Spock refused to give in to his feelings. He now wished for an opportunity to show that irritation. He turned on the recorder once more.

"There's no time left for hope. We are all facing serious charges -- what could possibly happen between now and the trial to remedy the situation? To help Jim get Spock back... to help Spock find himself? To help me get my two friends back? No, there will be no miracles this time."

Leonard McCoy was escorted to the quarters where he would spend his time before the trial. McCoy's first priority was to get into some dry clothes. It seemed eons ago when they were all frolicking in the bay -- watching the whales breech in the water -- knowing the world had been saved from it's own shortsightedness.

After he was warm and dry, the reality of the situation hit him. It seemed like it was ages ago when they left Vulcan. The doctor picked up a small recorder, conveniently lying on a small table. "Letting the criminals have a few last words, I guess."

"Personal log, Stardate 8390, Leonard McCoy recording. We have been separated from each other before the trial. What kind of thanks is that for saving the world? We, at least, should be allowed each other's company for our last night of 'freedom.'" McCoy added the word "freedom" sarcastically -- one could hardly call being prisoner in a room with guards outside your door freedom.

Then, the old country doctor surfaced. "Dammit, we voluntarily returned... risked our lives to save the world that will more than likely make us prisoners tomorrow."

"Of everything that has happened... the most important thing is Spock may have finally made strides in finding himself and, therefore, there is hope things could return to how they used to be -- the old Spock -- and the old Jim. That is, of course, if they allow us to even see each other after our sentencing."

"The trip back in time was an ordeal for us all. I was angry -- and hurt -- when Jim separated us -- sent me to work with Scotty. I wanted to be with them -- try to help -- to be there. Maybe Jim thought it would be better if they were alone. But, dammit, I'm a doctor, not an engineer. I should have been there for them -- and I needed them. Maybe I'm being selfish... but is the company of my best friends for what may have been our last day of freedom being selfish?

"Spock was at Kirk's side, where he belongs -- where Jim wanted. At the beginning, it wasn't the 'Spock' that Jim needed. It was not his friend -- the 'non-emotional Vulcan' that would do anything for his Captain; but it was a cool, logical First Officer, doing his duty as First Officer aboard a space vessel. I tried to get through to Spock -- tried to get him to discuss what had happened on philosophical grounds -- yet it was a cold, unfeeling Vulcan who responded. How in the world was Jim so patient -- as much as he must have been hurting? I couldn't even get him to talk to me about it, he was hurting so much."

The doctor hesitated, thinking about all of the events having occurred. "I wonder what our presence back there will do. We sure didn't worry much about it did we? Too late now, I guess... There was a time when we would have really thought about what we were doing back in time. I guess time was too critical for we had to save our world. But as far as Jim and Spock go... sometime, somewhere, something finally clicked. Who knows what happened while they were together in San Francisco. Or, maybe it was the Captain's outburst about feelings... or the danger Chekov was in..."

It is the human thing to do, was what Spock had said. "Yes, it was the human thing to do Spock. But weren't you also telling Jim that you were back -- that you finally had found yourself and could let go? At that point, when Jim's face lighted up, I don't think it would have mattered whether or not we returned, for you had given Jim hope of regaining a friend -- and myself the hope of having things as they were."

McCoy paused, realizing that just over 24 hours ago he was as sure as his name was McCoy that there would be no miracles. But there has been, he said to himself, then continued recording. "Jim has Spock back -- they are both whole again. And I have my friends back... both of them."

"But for how long," McCoy muttered bitterly. "We saved the world, now we're prisoners in it. Who knows what will happen tomorrow. Maybe it doesn't matter. Spock

is back -- if only I could ask one thing -- it would be for some time for them to be together -- time for us all to be together."

Leonard McCoy was busy inspecting the sickbay on the new **Enterprise**. "Engineers -- they love to change things," he chuckled to himself. "But this is one time I don't care... we're back together -- all of us -- the way things should be."

The **Enterprise** was on her way to her first mission; her crew the best in Starfleet -- once renegades -- now heroes.

McCoy reflected back on the charges and the sentencing -- and the panic he had felt when Jim had been reduced in rank. The panic had turned to a warm satisfaction when Kirk had been given a starship command. In his office, he continued the log he had started a few short months before.

"Personal log, Stardate 8390.1, Leonard McCoy recording. The results of the trial were a surprise to all of us -- a pleasant one I might add. It was not that long ago that I told Jim he had made a mistake to accept promotion -- that he should get back his command. I wonder if he ever took me seriously? I wonder if he even remembers what I said."

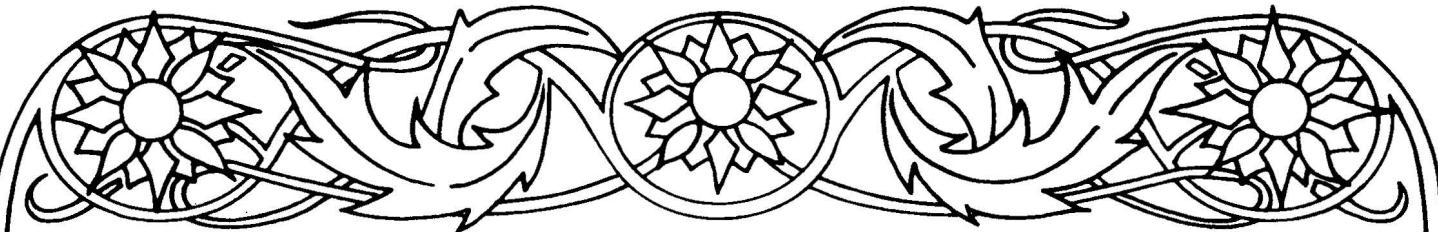
"It was like old times up on the bridge as the starship warped into space. Kirk in the command chair, Spock at his side, looking out into space."

Once the **Enterprise** was on her way, Kirk had transferred the con over to Sulu and the three of them had left the bridge. McCoy had gone to inspect sickbay. Kirk, McCoy was sure, was more than likely going over the ship inch by inch -- with Spock at his side. There would be time later for the three of them -- McCoy had the patience to wait now, for they had all the time in the universe.

"Jim appears to be happy... Spock is almost his old self, the entire crew glad to be back at their old posts. To think of all we've been through... Scotty losing his nephew, and not having time to mourn. All of us coming very close to losing our careers, Jim... losing Spock, his son and the **Enterprise**. I'm sure he feels the price was worth the outcome -- as do we all -- though he will grieve the loss of his son -- eventually. But he will at least have the support of his friends when the grief hits."

"He has Spock and a new **Enterprise**. Spock tells me the plans had been set for a time for the new ship -- to honor the legendary starship that died. Who could have guessed that the captain of the new starship **Enterprise** would be one Captain James T. Kirk, once Admiral -- once and still the best commander Starfleet has known. The best crew Starfleet has ever known is back together -- and now Starfleet itself has acknowledged that fact by giving us the **Enterprise** back."

"I am sure that only time is needed before things are back as they were -- for time heals all wounds and when you are surrounded by the support of your friends, time is not that important. All that is important is that we have, indeed, come home."



Whither Thou Goest

Where do we go from here,
my friend?

I see your eyes,
full of confusion, at first,
and empty of all feeling.

Then, like the newly risen Vulcan sun,
they fill with light and love

... at the sight of me.

There is trust
in those dark eyes
And a longing to reach out
to me.

I see it,
though no one else does.
It bridges the space between us
as surely as if you
touched me.

My eyes glory

... at the sight of you.

I want to take you
home again
but how do I tell you
there is no home,
that we are adrift here.

With no ship, no future,
only the past dreams of glory
and memories of those lost.

My eyes fill at the thought

... and turn to you.

Where do we go from here

... my dearest friend?

The Reasons

by: Ginna LaCroix

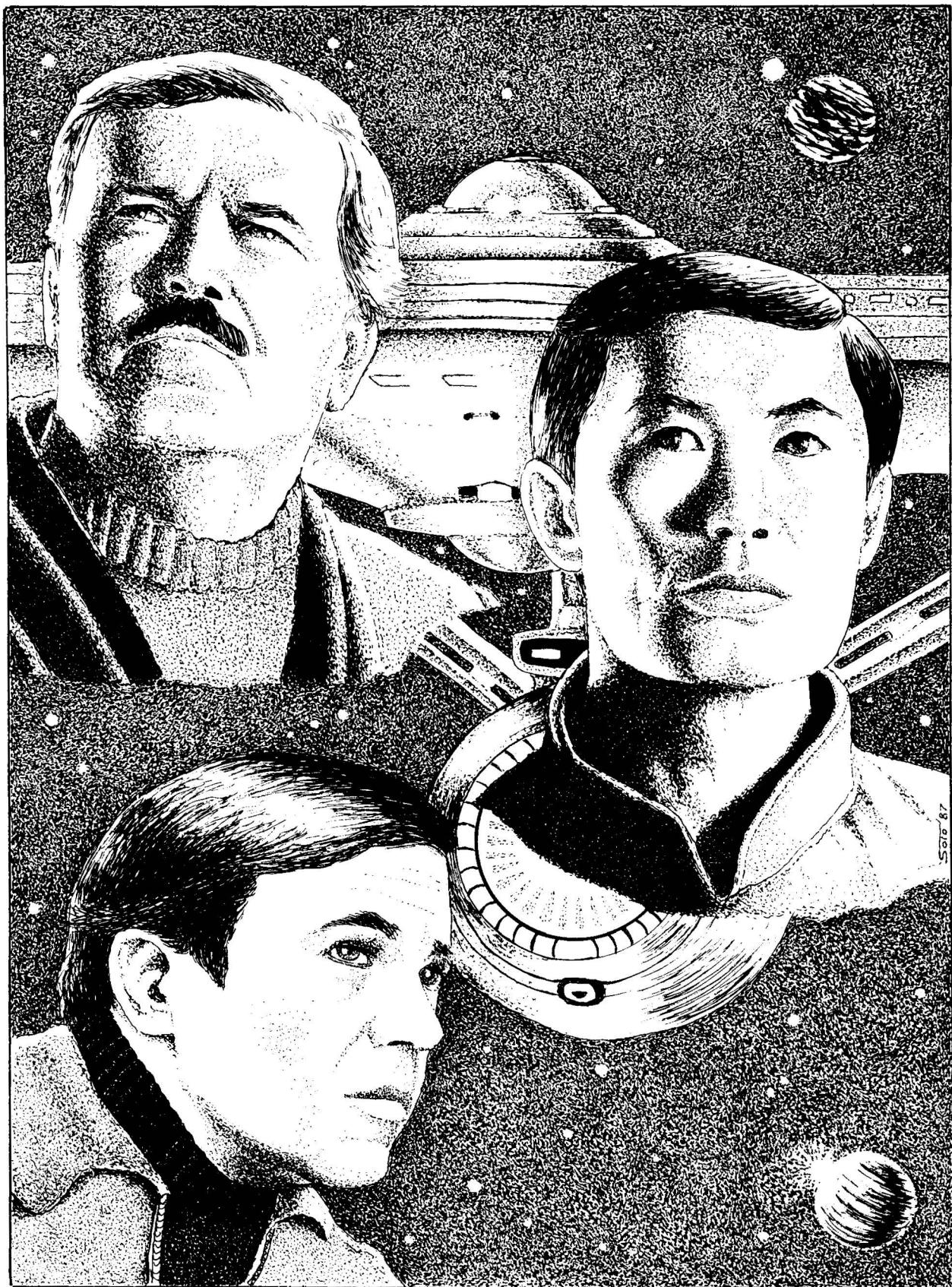
art: Chris Soto

**My friends, I can't ask you to go any further. Dr. McCoy
and I have to do this, the rest of you do not.**

You are giving us a way out,
An excuse to leave, and not lose face.
I left once before,
Foolishly believing I could become
The man you are.
There is no way I am leaving again.
Admiral, we're losing precious time.

You said you had a responsibility to a friend,
It works both ways.
You were my commanding officer,
You became my friend.
By doing that, you became my responsibility.
What course please, Admiral?

Mr. Scott?
So you feel you must ask!
We're different, you and I,
And you know it.
I loved this ship,
Where you loved all aboard her.
You are a leader of men,
While I tend a machine.
There is only one thing stronger than my love for her...
My respect for you, and what you shared with Spock.
I'd be grateful, Admiral, if you'd give the word.



ALL THE WAY

by: Mary Rottler & Lynn Syck
art: Cami Forsell

HOME

James Kirk stared out the large window at the clear night sky. The black velvet studded with twinkling stars mocked him, taunted him with all he had lost, could lose -- probably would lose.

The past months had been a nightmare of pain and loss, the present merely a temporary abeyance. The future? At the moment he could see nothing beyond the court-martial they all must face in the morning.

Kirk knew he should go to bed and try to get some rest so he could deal with what lay ahead; but he also knew he would not be able to sleep. This was more than likely his last night of freedom, though even that was a sham. He turned away from the window with a sigh to view his surroundings with a grim smile. The suite of rooms was luxurious, but with two security guards posted outside a locked door it was little more than a prison without bars. He and the rest of his "crew" had spent the evening together; but they had drifted away one by one to be "escorted" to their own quarters. There had been only small bits of conversation, with everyone seeming to draw comfort just from being together, perhaps for the last time.

Everyone had been there, that is, everyone except the one person he needed to see most -- Spock. In the silence, memories washed over him -- memories of the first time beaming aboard the Enterprise to be welcomed by a solemn, seemingly unfeeling, Vulcan first officer whom he had come to love. Kirk rubbed eyes that were suddenly stinging. A hand on his shoulder startled him.

"Jim? Are you..."

"Bones! I didn't hear you come in. Thought you went to bed."

Leonard McCoy folded his arms and studied Kirk thoughtfully. "Couldn't sleep. And don't change the subject."

"I'm OK. Just always seem on the verge of bawlin' like a baby." He threw himself onto one of the large easy chairs and covered his face with his hands.

McCoy knelt by the chair and placed a hand on Kirk's arm. "Maybe it would help. There's nothing wrong with crying, Jim. Sometimes we all need to let go. I've shed a few myself lately."

Kirk looked up, a small smile forming on his face. "I'm afraid if I start I'll never stop."

"Jim, it's not over yet. It's not like you to give up."

"I don't think I am." Kirk leaned his head back into the soft chair. "It's just all hit me at once I guess -- what I've done. How many lives I've ruined -- yours, Scotty's..."

"Jim, stop this. You've done nothing of the kind. We made our choices, freely, knowing what the consequences could be. Don't negate what we've done by making it seem we were only blindly following orders."

Studying the doctor's face, Kirk looked for any sign that he was merely practicing his bedside manner, but found none. "The others?"

"We all feel the same way, Jim."

Kirk ran his hand through his hair. "Thanks, Bones. I guess, as usual, I was only seeing things from my point of view. I seem to remember you telling me more than once not to be so hard on myself."

"Not that you ever listened." McCoy grumbled. He gave Kirk's arm a final pat and stood. Moving to the sofa opposite Kirk's chair, he stretched out.

After a few moments of thoughtful silence, Kirk asked, "How's Chekov?"

"They want to keep him overnight for observation. His blacking out tonight was more a side effect of simple fatigue and the procedures they put him through in that damned hospital."

"So he'll be back on his feet in time to face his court-martial." The Admiral had not intended to sound so bitter and quickly chose another subject. "Bones, how's Gillian?"

"Well, she'll have to stay in the medical complex for at least a day, maybe two, just to make sure we aren't giving her any of our germs and she isn't giving us any of her twentieth century diseases."

"I wonder if she realizes what she's given up," Kirk mused.

I wonder if you realize you could be talking about yourself, my friend, McCoy thought to himself. Then, aloud, he said, "She seems all right in that department so far. And she and Spock are getting along famously. He was there when I stopped in to check on her earlier tonight. There were in deep discussion..."

McCoy stopped as Kirk stood abruptly and began pacing. McCoy sat up. "That's what's really bothering you the most, isn't it? Not the court-martial, or all we just went through. It's Spock."

The doctor waited but when Kirk didn't say anything, he snapped. "Don't bullshit me, Jim. It's Spock that's tearing you apart. You have him back and yet you don't. And you're not sure if you ever will. You're going to have to stop being patient and push a little. The Vulcans had him for three months, now it's your turn. He's there for you, I guarantee it, but he will never find himself without you to help. He needs you."

Kirk looked away from McCoy's intense blue eyes, wanting desperately to believe, but still doubting. "I probably won't see him again until after the court-martial and even then... "

"Call him, talk to him now." McCoy interrupted briskly.

Kirk snorted, "Call Spock and tell him I just want to talk? In case you hadn't noticed, he's not exactly into small talk right now."

McCoy threw up his hands. "Dammit Jim, are you afraid to let him know how much you need him? He certainly needs you -- even I can see that."

"How do you know?"

McCoy's eyes were full of compassion as he gripped Kirk's shoulders tightly. "Just trust your old country doctor. I know." Not giving Kirk a chance to respond he headed for the door. Just short of opening it, he turned. "Find him, Jim. Tell him what you're feeling. If you don't, you may regret it."

Kirk picked his way down the moonlit path to an isolated cove on the beach near Monterey. After his talk with McCoy, he had decided to go for a walk, ending up here, although technically he was not supposed to leave the jurisdiction of Starfleet Central.

Getting past the two guards was easy enough -- a glib lie of going to see McCoy pleading a headache. He had considered "borrowing" the security men's aircraft but instead opted to catch an air taxi. He was in enough hot water without adding a second count of stealing government property to his record.

Kirk liked to consider this area his own particular section of the beach. It was secluded and difficult to get to, encircled by cliffs towering above him. The moonlight shone down on the calm sea, the waves gently lapping at his feet. He turned, barely making out the small cave, remembering several years before when he had brought Spock here and they had been forced to seek shelter in the cave from a storm in the cave, huddling together for warmth. Then they had not needed to talk -- had understood one another without words.

Damn, he missed sharing with Spock. Vulcan had their universally renowned scientist back. Starfleet had their famous Vulcan officer back. However Kirk was beginning to wonder whether he would ever have his friend back.

He kept cautioning himself to be patient. Bones was wrong, he could not push Spock. He had never done it in the past and would not start now. Spock would have to find his own way, and needed the freedom to do so. Even if it meant that their friendship would have to suffer to allow him that freedom.

Kirk's mind wandered, and he smiled as he remembered Spock in the tank with George and Gracie, and then the Vulcan's inept attempts to use profanity when talking to Gillian. Undoubtedly, Spock would need much more help reintegrating into Federation society. Bones was right in saying Spock needed him, but not in the way he meant. The

Vulcan needed help in learning about living with humans; he did not need the help of an emotionally mixed up Admiral who childishly wished everything could be the same.

Suddenly, undeniably, he felt that whisper touch in his mind. And, as he had on Vulcan, when he had looked up to the cliff towering above him, there was a figure in a white robe, indistinguishable in the moonlight. And yet, he knew it was Spock.

Spock stared at the lone figure on the beach. His father was expecting him at the Vulcan Embassy. He was unable to explain what had drawn him here. He certainly had not expected to find Admiral Kirk here alone on the beach, especially since he was here against Starfleet's orders.

More disturbing was the difficulty he was having determining his body's internal disturbance. There was a tightness in his chest he could not explain -- his stomach felt strange as if there were... what had his mother called them? He dredged up a word from long past: butterflies, she would have said it felt like butterflies in his stomach.

He felt a need to be closer to Admiral Kirk, but had no reason to explain his presence. However, as on Vulcan, he found himself watching the still figure, reassured by the human's presence. Illogical.

The Admiral looked up, apparently sensing his presence. The two men stood motionless until Spock turned and slowly picked his way down the pebble-strewn path, his feet seeming to know the twists and turns without his consciously realizing it. Spock's mind was dwelling on his reasons for being here; and so far, he had not found a logical one for doing so.

Kirk greeted him as always with a soft smile, his eyes searching Spock's own puzzled face. "Spock, what brings you here?"

The Vulcan hesitated, finally saying, "I do not know, Admiral. I can not explain why I came here. I did not expect to find you, since you were confined to your quarters, were you not?"

Kirk grinned. "I guess I've gotten so used to disobeying Starfleet's orders, it's becoming second nature to me."

"It is not wise to compound the problem, Admiral."

Kirk stiffened and turned away, facing the ocean. Spock frowned, not sure what had caused this reaction, only knowing that Admiral Kirk appeared upset. Spock lifted a hand, almost touching the Admiral's shoulder before he realized what he was doing. He forced his hand down to his side, totally confused by his reactions.

"No, it is not wise." Kirk said softly, "Spock, do you remember coming here several years ago... with me?"

"No, my memory of past events is still incomplete," Spock explained patiently. "The time warp we experienced did revive some memories. However basically, Admiral, I cannot remember."

Kirk shivered slightly but Spock only peripherally noticed. His attention focused inward. "This beach is familiar to me. I feel an... attraction to this place I do not understand. I have the distinct impression we were close here, you were holding me..."

Spock looked up, breaking off. "But that is impossible, Admiral. You would not..." His voice trailed off as Kirk turned to face him with curiously shining eyes.

"You do remember, Spock! I was holding you. We had gotten wet and you were freezing. We took shelter in that cave over there and I was trying to keep you warm."

Spock frowned, trying to put the pieces together. "That is illogical. Vulcans can compensate for loss of heat."

"But you're half human, you were still cold. Besides, we liked... well it was nice to be close to one another. You fell asleep on my shoulder. It was... nice." Kirk lifted a hand to place it on Spock's arm but he let it fall, shrugging.

"Admiral, what exactly is our relationship? I know you are my commanding officer of many years. I... know you are my friend. Are we more?"

Kirk looked at him curiously, hearing the emphasis on the words. "Yes, we are friends. How do you mean 'more'?"

Spock searched the hazel eyes. "Did we have a relationship... a relationship in..."

"You mean a sexual relationship?" Kirk interrupted. He smiled gently. "No, Spock. You were -- are closer to me than my brother ever was. I love you... in fact, I believe we were closer than any lovers could ever be. You once called me T'hy'la."

Spock frowned, trying to remember. Loneliness... he had not labeled it as such, but surrounded by the healers and yet separated from Kirk he now knew the indefinable sensation he had felt was loneliness. And now, was it the same feeling or more? "What are you feeling now, Admiral?"

Kirk jerked his head up, staring at Spock. "Feeling Spock? Why do you want to know?"

Spock knew his face must reflect his confusion but he found himself unable to control his reactions with this man. "I need to understand. I... I feel but do not have an explanation for what it is I feel."

Kirk nodded, looking back out to the sea. "I feel... sadness. Right now, I'm glad to have you here. I'm glad the Earth is safe but I am sad that everything has changed."

"The court-martial is worrying you, Admiral?"

Shifting his position, Kirk continued to gaze at the water. "Yes, I'd be a fool if I wasn't a little worried about the mess I've gotten my friends into."

"My mother tried to explain, but I do not understand why you saved my life. You jeopardized much more than you gained. It was not a logical decision, Admiral."

With his eyes blazing, Kirk stared up at Spock. As Spock held his gaze, trying to analyze the human before him, the hazel eyes changed to an expression of hurt... and... was it grief he saw reflected there?

Kirk moved several feet away, saying softly, "Bones is wrong. We can't pick up where we left off."

Spock was not certain whether the Admiral intended for him to hear. But he was certain Kirk was asking him for something. He did not understand the question. He wanted to understand. It was important although he could not explain logically why it was so important.

Spock approached Kirk, hands clasped behind his back, and asked, "What is it you need from me, Admiral?"

There it was again. Kirk not only visibly but mentally withdrew. Spock could almost feel mental barriers being slammed into place.

Kirk replied evenly. "Mr. Spock, just... just leave. Everything is fine, I'm just a little emotionally wrung out right now."

Spock hesitated and then placed a hand on Kirk's shoulder. "I need to understand. Your emotions are..."

"Are not open to Vulcan dissection. Go ask a computer, I'm sure you can have a much more satisfying conversation. How do I explain what you would have simply understood before, what we would have said without words. Right now, I..." Kirk broke off, striding away from Spock, down the beach.

What had Kirk been about to say? Spock stood where Kirk had left him, sorting through the conversation. The Admiral was obviously angry and frustrated, but Spock found that he was frustrated as well. He needed to understand this compulsion, this need to be with Kirk.

Kirk had dropped down to sit in the sand, head resting on his updrawn knees.

Spock strode quickly to his side and knelt down and placed a hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Jim, I need your help. I do not understand this. I..."

Kirk's head snapped up. "What did you say, Spock?"

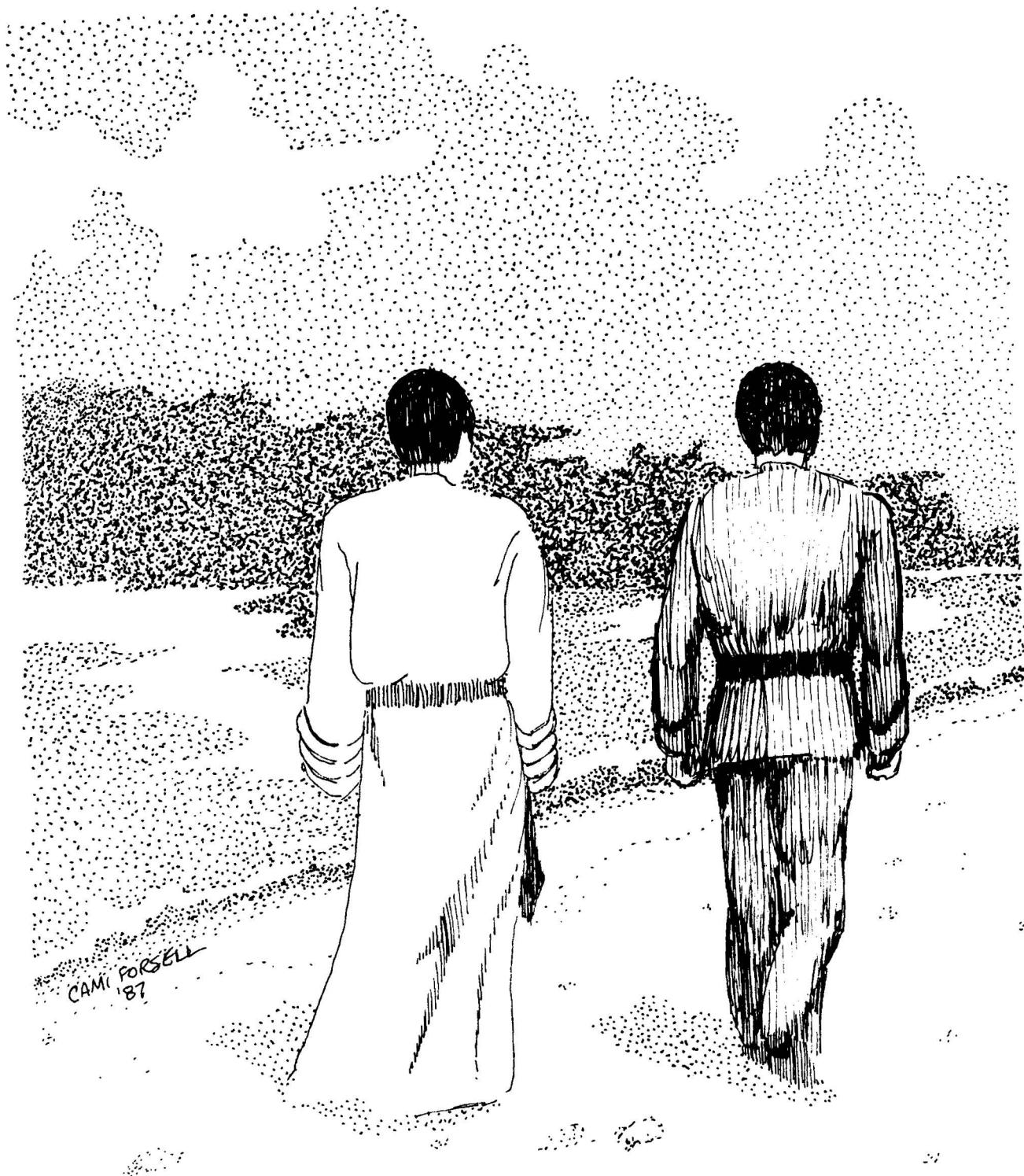
"Simply that I need your help and..."

"No, not that. You called me Jim." The hazel eyes searched his and suddenly a smile like a brilliant sunrise lit Kirk's face.

Spock felt as if his smile was lighting his soul from within -- a part of his soul that had been empty since the refusion. Now he understood the reason for his confusion, for the term to explain what he was feeling had no analog in the Vulcan culture and had not been part of his training on Vulcan. 'This simple feeling' he had once said before. Spock now amended it, 'This simple feeling called love.'

"What else would I call you, except perhaps T'hy'la?" Spock asked softly.

Kirk was not sure if Spock's face reflected his feelings or if he was sensing Spock's emotion. He did know for the first moment in more time than he cared to remember he saw Spock really look at him, match his eyes, saw the love and caring he thought he had lost forever. Kirk did not try to stop the tears this time; knew he would not be able to if he had tried.



Spock's face became troubled as he misunderstood what he was seeing. "Jim, I am sorry." He stood and Kirk quickly followed.

"Spock, no, don't be, not for me."

The Vulcan turned away. "Because of me you have lost... "

Kirk's hands grabbed him from behind and turned him around. The tears on his face glistened in the full moonlight but his expression was happy, peaceful for the first time in months.

"Listen to me, Spock. No matter what happens tomorrow, I've lost nothing. Do you hear me? I've had it all -- the stars, the best ship, the best crew in Starfleet. I have Bones, the best friend a man could ever have. But more than anything, I have you back."

Suddenly, all the pain, the anguish came pouring out of him. He needed to tell Spock -- needed to share with him what he had kept inside all the long lonely months.

"When I lost you -- when you died in that reactor chamber -- I wanted to die too. I couldn't touch you, comfort you, could not even say what I should have said long ago, that I love you."

"And then you were gone and I was angry -- angry at you for dying and at myself for not being able to save you."

"Not very logical, Jim." The dark eyes were soft.

Kirk smiled ruefully. "No, not logical at all perhaps. But I didn't have you there to straighten me out. And then, I had a second chance. How many people ever have that, Spock?"

"But at what cost... "

Kirk stopped him with an upraised hand. "I won't deny that losing David was devastating, probably in ways I don't even realize yet. And the ship..." his voice caught and he could only close his eyes against the pain, but he opened them quickly. "But I would endure it all again and whatever else it took to be here at this moment with you, alive and well, emotionally as well as physically."

He stopped, thinking of what McCoy had said to him earlier. "Don't negate what I've done, what we've all done by telling us we shouldn't have done it."

"Is it permissible to say thank you?" There was the tiniest quirk of the lips.

Kirk wiped his face with the back of his hand. "I believe the proper response is you're welcome." He smiled in response, and noticed the lightening sky.

It would be dawn soon, the day of reckoning. But it was also a day in which two humpback whales played free and safe in the ocean that had spawned them three centuries before. A day in which the lives of millions of people on Earth went on as they had before the probe almost destroyed them. And it was a day in which Spock lived. Balanced against anything Starfleet might do, Kirk was satisfied.

He turned and started up the path, knowing Spock was -- and would always be -- with him.



Where Are You,

Spock?

by: Vonne Shepard
art: Andrea Kunz

Where are you, Spock, my friend?
Where is that look you used to give?
Remember, we have shared a lot.
Don't you remember, have you forgot?

That little spark of humanity,
Is it gone for all eternity?
Have the Vulcans programmed it away?
I liked you much better the other way.

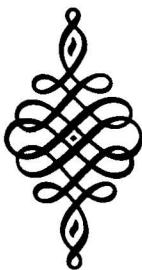
You're not a computer, you never were,
Although you tried hard enough, for sure.
Emotions were alien, you continued to say,
You preferred living the Vulcan way.

Through the years, we mellowed together,
Understood, and even liked each other.
Then came the day you went away,
And behind, I had to stay.

We brought you back among the living
For everything, we were giving.
Now you're different, not the same.
And in my heart, I feel a pain.

You must relearn about the human soul,
For you're half human, after all.
We all have our problems, we're not perfect.
We make mistakes, but we learn from it.

Return to us Spock, like days long ago.
We will go where man must go.
Beyond the stars and into space,
Travelling together for the rest of our days.



BIRDS OF A FEATHER

by: Mimi English

art: Sherry Velthamp

Listening drowsily to the sound of waves breaking on the shore, James Kirk stretched and winced. He opened his eyes and glanced over to where Dr. McCoy was arguing with Spock. They had not noticed. He sat up, gingerly testing his stiff muscles. McCoy whirled about as he struggled to his feet.

"Now, where do you think you're going?" McCoy demanded, moving to his side.

"I want to check on the colonists," Captain Kirk stated firmly. "Stop mothering me."

"While you are my patient, I'm the boss so sit back down," Dr. McCoy grasped Kirk's arm as the Captain wobbled with a wave of dizziness. Spock instantly joined them and clutched Kirk's other arm, inspecting him closely.

"Captain, you are in pain. You are still suffering the effects of a concussion and need to recuperate from your other injuries," the Vulcan said in a quiet voice. "I respectfully advise you to return to your blanket on the sand."

"Spock, you know I don't like staying behind," Kirk grumbled. "I'm not in that bad of shape." He saw his two friends exchange a solemn look.

"Jim, you were lucky you weren't killed -- very lucky," McCoy said earnestly. "When that wall collapsed... You weren't breathing when we dug you out."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock nodded. "You should not have risked your person on my behalf."

"I know you have a thick skull, Mr. Spock, but not that thick," Kirk teased the Vulcan.

"A simple shout would have been sufficient," Spock said severely.

Kirk grinned at him, remembering the time Spock had shoved him out of the way of a plant's poisonous darts instead of shouting, taking the darts meant for him. Spock raised an eyebrow at the Captain's smile. "This time the shoe is on the other foot," Kirk teased. Spock eyed his feet with a puzzled look and the humans both laughed. "Just an expression," Kirk explained.

McCoy cleared his throat and said gruffly, "Well, I for one, look forward to these next three days. I'll be in charge with nothing much to do but nursemaid you and keep an eye on the injured colonists."

"Three point four days, doctor," Spock corrected.

"Whatever," McCoy muttered. "Anyway, Jim, haven't you always said you wanted a beach to walk on?"

"To limp on is more like it." Kirk complained.

"To rest on is what I should have said," McCoy scowled at him. "You need some time to recover from those two broken ribs, and that left leg of yours was badly fractured. I know you're still stiff and sore." The doctor eyed his captain a moment. "Are you still having any dizziness from your concussion?"

Kirk changed the subject. "Can you get the rest of the colonists off Adam II in one more trip?" he asked Spock.

Spock nodded. "Affirmative, Captain; although conditions will be necessarily crowded. We shall maintain Warp 8 to hasten our return."

"Scotty won't like that," Kirk frowned. "We need an overhaul badly. Maintain warp 8 en route to Adam II but I suggest warp 4 returning."

"That will delay our return by 2.1 days, Captain," Spock protested.

"Well, what's the hurry?" Kirk retorted. "Save the engines on the way back. It's rescuing the colonists that's important."

Very well, Captain," Spock reluctantly gave in, but looked at him with concern. "I trust you will follow Dr. McCoy's instructions and recover from your injuries."

"I'll be fine," Kirk waved a hand at the green ocean and the sea birds darting among the waves for fish. "This will be relaxing... despite my 'mother-hen'." Kirk nodded in McCoy's direction.

"Indeed; no hazardous life-forms were discovered on the preliminary survey," Spock reported. "A boar-like creature inhabits the forests inland but the coasts and the smaller islands appear merely to be bird hatcheries. However, the survey was conducted by an unmanned probe, so it may prove incomplete." Spock warned.

"Now he tells me," McCoy muttered.

Spock raised a brow at the remark, and continued, "The sea may have some possibly dangerous denizens, so I would advise against swimming, much as you enjoy the sport, even if Dr. McCoy would permit it."

"He's not doing any swimming," McCoy said with firmness. "He's going to be resting."

Kirk gave him an innocent look and turned back to his first officer. "Well, Spock, the sooner you leave the sooner you'll be back. Take care of my ship," Kirk ordered with a smile.

"Affirmative, Captain... doctor," Spock nodded to McCoy and pulled out his communicator. "Spock to beam up..." Kirk and McCoy watched the Vulcan fade-out.

Kirk sighed. "I hate staying behind but... a week of paradise won't be so bad, eh, Bones?"

"Just what the doctor ordered," McCoy quipped. "Now, settle back down on that blanket and stay put. If the sun gets too hot, go into the shelter and try to rest. You've got a thermos and rations and your communicator. If you need anything else let me know," McCoy waved a hand, "I'm going to check on the colonists."

"Any serious injuries?" Kirk asked with concern.

"Only one besides you," McCoy informed. "Dr. Starkes' wife. Get some rest; I'll be back in a couple of hours." Kirk watched McCoy head toward the shelters built inland to house the colonists temporarily. The uninjured colonists had been assigned various tasks, including felling trees to form a clearing in which pre-fabricated buildings from ship's stores were being set up.

Kirk reflected that many more shelters would be needed when the rest of the colonists arrived. Kirk had radioed for a supply ship to be dispatched from the closest starbase but it would be several weeks before adequate supplies arrive. Much would be needed for the colonists to start a new life...

Kirk relaxed and closed his eyes, soon drifting off to sleep. Then, the nightmare again...

the emergency call to Adam II while on their way for a complete overhaul... having to rescue the colonists from severe seismic disturbances and transport them to the newly discovered small planet the colonists ironically named 'Eve'... helping the remaining colonists evacuate their collapsing village and protecting them until the Enterprise could return for them... beaming the injured people to the ship and helping extricate some who were trapped. He saw a wall caving in behind Spock... diving at him... knocking Spock to safety but trapped himself... a blow to his head... no air... unable to breathe! Spock!... hearing Spock's voice shouting his name as the Vulcan dug frantically for him... pressure on his chest...

Kirk awoke abruptly. There was still pressure on his chest! He opened his eyes to see a pure white sea bird the size of a large earth sea gull standing on him. The bird cocked its head and made a chirping sound. Kirk grinned with relief.

"Why, hello there," he said softly. The bird squawked, flew up into the air and landed a few feet away. Kirk spoke soothingly at it. "I won't hurt you," he called, crumbling a ration bar and holding out his hand. The bird hopped closer and pecked at

the pieces. The bird then gazed at him intently. "You look just like Spock," Kirk chuckled. The bird cocked its head again.

Other sea birds started circling above, keening hauntingly as they dove for fish. The white one who had visited Kirk flew off and joined them. Kirk watched as they dove through the waves, catching brightly colored fish. There were other white birds among them but his was the most daring, Kirk thought to himself with a smile.

As the sun began to set, the sea birds flew away in various directions, some to the distant islands and some inland, most of them carrying fish. 'Little Spock', as Kirk thought of him, circled back low overhead and dropped something wet on Kirk's chest, much to his surprise.

"A fish!" the human stared in amazement. "Thanks, Spock!" he waved at the bird. It keened, then dove for another fish and flew off.

When McCoy returned, he carried more rations. Kirk waved the fish at him teasingly. "Got my own."

McCoy stared. "How did you get that?"

"Oh, Spock brought it to me," Kirk explained, with an innocent look on his face.

McCoy gazed at him in concern, then put a hand on his forehead. "You're not feverish..." the doctor muttered.

Kirk grinned. "Take it easy Bones; I named one of the sea birds Spock. It has the same look Spock gets when he's reading my mind," Kirk explained.

"Wait 'til I tell Spock," McCoy chuckled.

McCoy built a small fire from driftwood. Afterwards, they sat in front of the fire contentedly, while Kirk toasted his fish on the end of a stick, and McCoy ate his dinner from the rations.

"Hey, this is pretty good! Great spot to be a colonist," Kirk sighed, watching fish leap for insects as night came.

McCoy slapped at a buzzing insect. "I'll go get the repellent," he muttered.

"There's always a serpent in paradise," Kirk teased as McCoy slapped at more pests. "How's things with the colonists?"

"Well, Hutchens is a pretty good second-in-command," McCoy said thoughtfully. "He keeps everyone busy -- and their minds off what has happened. I'm glad there's no children yet. Just think if there were kids trapped on Adam II for 3 days," McCoy shuddered. "Hope the others are ok."

"George Starkes has a good reputation -- both as an agriculturalist and as a leader," Kirk assured him, as he yawned. "He will be able to keep order until they are rescued, and we left medical and security teams to help out." Kirk yawned again.

Kirk's tiredness was not lost on the doctor's watchful eyes. "Time we turned in, Jim. Want something for pain?"

"Stop worrying, Bones. I'm fine," Kirk protested. "But I guess it is time to get some sleep." McCoy doused the fire and followed Kirk into their tent.

When morning came, McCoy crept out quietly as Kirk slept. Kirk had not slept this well since his accident. The doctor stared at the hundreds of fishing sea birds. The grey ones looked like typical earth-type sea birds, as did the grey and white ones; however, the solid white birds were different, somehow. He felt they looked more like small pelicans with wide bills, perfect for scooping up fish. He stood, watching a few minutes as they continuously came and went to the various islands and islets, while some flew inland carrying fish.

"Must be returning to their nests to feed their young," he decided and trudged back to the village through the thick underbrush. As he approached he heard phaser fire. McCoy hurried the rest of the way and came to an abrupt stop at the clearing. Some of the colonists were killing the sea birds and laughing.

"Hey!" he shouted. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"We're fishing," one chuckled, as he picked up a fish from where a grey bird had fallen.

"Well, cut it out. We don't know enough about this planet yet, you could unbalance the ecology." McCoy insisted.

"We need supplies," Hutchens protested. "Here's both fresh meat and fish at the same time."

"The birds are feeding their young!" McCoy said angrily.

Hutchens shrugged. "Looks like there's thousands of them," he pointed. "There's a white one!" He shot it suddenly. The bird squawked and fell to the ground. The remaining birds began to circle higher overhead as McCoy lunged at the man, spoiling his aim so that another white one was only grazed. "What's the big idea?" Hutchens glared at McCoy.

"Will you look at that!" a colonist pointed in amazement. The wounded bird was flapping its wings, desperately trying to stay aloft when suddenly, two other white birds flew to its side and supported it.

"That does it. No more shooting. Those birds are showing signs of intelligence!" McCoy exclaimed. "We must study them further!"

The men scoffed at him. "Aw, doc, now don't be ridiculous; they're just birds."

McCoy, ignoring the colonists, stared intently at the birds. The injured one obviously had a damaged wing and was being helped to fly by the others. He watched them fly inland then said with determination. "I'm in charge here for now. No more shooting birds; at least not until the **Enterprise** gets back. Then, we'll see."

"Crazy old doctor," one colonist muttered.

"And, don't eat those birds," he warned. "I've got to run tests first; they might be poisonous."

"Well, I guess that makes sense," Hutchens agreed as McCoy gathered the dead birds. "How about the fish?"

"They have been checked out and are safe to eat," he assured the men, who cheerfully collected the dropped fish. McCoy went into the infirmary with his armful of dead sea birds. First, he intended to check on the injured colonists. He was the only doctor around until the rest of the people arrived. The husband and wife medical team had stayed on Adam II with the stranded colonists. Most of the injuries were broken arms or sprains, except for one woman with a head injury. She was Dr. Starkes' wife and he had reluctantly let her go on without him, feeling his duty was to the stranded colonists.

McCoy gave instructions to the women helping him and went to his make-shift office to perform autopsies on the birds.

James Kirk was wakened by a chirrup in his ear. He opened his eyes to see a bird's eye, only inches from his.

"Why, hello, again," he smiled at the white bird of the previous day. At least, he thought it was the same bird. It had the same look in its eyes. The bird chirruped again and bobbed its head, then began pitter-pattering around the tent, inspecting everything. Kirk watched with amusement and chuckled when the bird found his ration bars. "Help yourself," he said. The bird turned its head and stared at him. "Go ahead and take one," Kirk gestured. The bird picked up a ration bar in its wide beak and slowly waddled to his side, dropped it by Kirk's hand and waited expectantly.

"Want me to open it?" Kirk asked in astonishment. "Why, aren't you a smart one. I'm definitely going to call you Spock; you're one of a kind." He unwrapped the ration bar and crumbled it for the bird, who ate it from Kirk's hand. When finished, the bird bobbed its head. Kirk chuckled and said, "You are very welcome." The bird chirped and headed toward the doorway, then turned, looking at him rather inquisitively, or so it seemed to Kirk.

"Be right out," Kirk assured it, as he yawned and stretched. He winced, as his stiff and sore muscles protested. The bird cocked his head and regarded him.

"I was injured," Kirk explained. "I'm just suffering the after-effects of a mild concussion and a lot of sore muscles. I'll be fine as soon as I loosen up." The bird inspected him for several moments, then bobbed its head. "I believe you really understand what I say!" Kirk exclaimed. "I can't wait for Spock to see you." Kirk followed his new-found friend out of the tent. The sun was high overhead. With a final chirrup, the bird flew out over the sea, diving among the waves for fish with the others. Kirk watched for a while before he noticed that this time 'Little Spock' was the only white bird in the bunch, unlike the day before.

"That's odd," he murmured. The white bird frequently flew back to Kirk and keened, dropping fish in his lap and returning to dive more and more daringly, doing countless aerial acrobatics, seemingly to entertain its new human friend. After one exceptionally intricate maneuver it paused motionless a foot above the sea.

Kirk cried out in horror. A creature with the head of a fish and tail of an alligator leaped out and seized one of the bird's legs. Kirk scooped up a piece of driftwood and hurled it, striking the creature, as it opened its mouth. Little Spock frantically fluttered out of its reach but was caught by a wave, flapping its wings helplessly as the sea swept it up and pounded onto the beach. Kirk splashed in after the bird, trying to reach the piteously crying bird before it was sucked back out by the undertow.

The alligator fish surfaced nearby and headed for the injured bird. "Damn!" Kirk exclaimed, making a desperate dive for the bird just as the alligator fish lunged. It lashed Kirk painfully on his leg with its tail, but Kirk caught the bedraggled bird in his outstretched hands. A wave broke over him and he coughed and sputtered but hung on determinedly to Little Spock and crawled slowly out of the sea, holding the bird against his chest and stroking it soothingly.

Kirk crawled into the tent, protecting the bird in his grasp. "It's all right; you're safe now," he said gently, setting the bird down on his bedding inside the tent. He dried off the whimpering bird and examined it. "Your leg!" Kirk cried out in dismay. Little Spock's right leg dangled, obviously broken. Kirk wrapped the bird in a jacket and held it like a baby. "Seems like you and I are in the same boat," Kirk said as he became aware of the throbbing pain in his own leg.

"There, there," he whispered soothingly. "Don't worry... I'll get Bones to fix us both up, you'll see," he stroked its head. "He'll be back soon. I'm sure he has some plasticast here with him -- or at least I hope so." The bird lifted its head to gaze at him intently. It made an inquiring chirp. "That's right; you'll be ok," Kirk nodded and smiled reassuringly. "I'll protect you. You're safe now." The bird bobbed its head and continued to gaze at him. Kirk felt an itch between his eyes and scratched it absently. Kirk wondered to himself why he was so drawn to the bird -- and the bird to him. "You've never seen humans before, have you?" Kirk asked. "Is that why you are so friendly? My name is Kirk. KIRK," he repeated. "I am... "

"Kirrik!" the bird said. Kirk's eyes widened. The bird looked back and bobbed its head. "Kirrik!" it repeated, then said "Kaa!"

"You understand... you really understand!" Kirk said in amazement. "I wonder if -- damn! I wish Spock were here."

"Hey, Jim! Aren't you up yet?" McCoy called out as he ducked into the tent. "I've brought some delicious... why, what have you got there?" McCoy set his container down and bent over Kirk. "A bird? "Don't tell me you shot it..." the doctor's question went unanswered as he noticed Kirk's condition. His eyes widened. "You've been swimming!"

"Not exactly," Kirk grimaced. This is 'Little Spock', the bird I was telling you about. I rescued him from a sea creature and... " he gave McCoy a sheepish look, "I think I broke my leg again."



"Not that same leg?! Dammit, Jim," McCoy exploded, ripping open Kirk's pant leg. "Well, you're going to have to put up with a cast until the *Enterprise* returns," he said in disgust, opening his medikit. Although he kept muttering under his breath, his hands were gentle as he tended his friend.

After he finished setting Kirk's leg and had applied a plasticast, Kirk looked up at him and said, "Now, I want you to fix the bird's leg."

"What?" McCoy stared. "I'm a doctor, not a veterinarian."

"You fixed my leg; you can fix his. That's an order, doctor," Kirk said crisply. "Please, Bones," he wheedled. Kirk removed the jacket he had wrapped the bird in. "I'm very fond of this little fellow."

"Hey, he's a white one; they're different from the others." McCoy observed.

"He's intelligent," Kirk informed him, as he stroked the bird. "He understands what I say. Watch this," he turned to the bird. "My name is Kirk. Say my name," he coaxed.

It bobbed its head. "Kirrik!" the bird said obligingly. Kirk gave a smug nod toward McCoy.

"Ha!" McCoy scoffed. "Any parrot can say your name just by coughing."

Kirk gave him an exasperated sigh and turned back to the bird. "His name is McCoy. Can you say McCoy?"

The bird turned its head to regard the doctor. "IckKoy!" it said.

McCoy's mouth dropped open. "Well, I'll be!"

McCoy reached for the bird, but Kirk stopped him, "Wait a minute," he looked at the bird. "McCoy is a doctor -- a healer -- he will fix your leg like mine," Kirk tapped his leg cast. The bird made several squawking sounds as McCoy gently took it from Kirk. The two men exchanged glances.

"Guess he doesn't want a leg cast," McCoy grinned. "Wrap that jacket around him leaving his leg free and hold him steady." McCoy instructed. "That's it." He bent over the damaged leg. Kirk attempted to soothe the bird but it continued to protest.

When Dr. McCoy finished, Kirk unwrapped the bird. It flapped its wings in an attempt to fly. It escaped from Kirk's grasp but could only rise a few feet before it fell due to the weight of the leg cast. McCoy picked it up as it keened piteously.

"Bring him here," Kirk commanded. "Now, listen to me, Little Spock," he said sternly. "You will be all right. Your leg will be healed in... how long, Bones?"

McCoy considered. "Should be healed by the time the ship gets back."

Kirk nodded and turned back to the bird. "Five days, Spock, and you'll be good as new. Understand? And you can meet the Spock I named you after. I think you'll like him." The bird regarded him intently.

"Kaa!" it said sadly.

"What smells so good?" Kirk sniffed.

"I almost forgot," McCoy grinned. "Fish stew. The women made it."

"Umm! Well, get those fish outside that Little Spock caught and the three of us will eat," Kirk instructed.

As the triad had dinner, the newest member pecked with curiosity at its own leg cast between bites of fish. McCoy told Kirk about the colonists shooting the birds and the results of his autopsies.

"The white ones have considerably more cranial development than the others," he said. "Also, they have the beginning vestiges of arms. They are, more than likely, the evolving species on this planet." He related to Kirk the incident when the two white birds aided the injured one to fly.

Kirk frowned. "You were right to forbid shooting them. That, along with the results of your examination, proves they're intelligent. Though I knew that all along, didn't I, Little Spock?" Kirk stroked the bird.

"Kaa!" it chirped back.

"I want Spock to try a mind meld on this little fellow," Kirk said softly, gazing into the bird's eyes. His forehead itched and he rubbed it absently.

"That could be dangerous, Jim, if the birds are only... "

"I have a hunch about them," Kirk interrupted firmly, still looking at the white bird. "Say 'Spock'" he coaxed. The bird stared back.

"Kaa!" it said loudly.

McCoy pursed his lips, and thought, the Captain and his hunches, but said nothing further.

At sunset, the sea birds began flying back to their island hatcheries. Little Spock eluded Kirk and made desperate attempts to follow, flapping his wings only to rise a few feet and fall back to the ground. He squawked in protest as McCoy grabbed him and carried him to Kirk. The bird continued to cry, tucking its head under Kirk's arm as he stroked it and spoke in calm tones. As evening settled in and McCoy built a fire, Little Spock lifted his head and looked intently at Kirk.

"What is it, Spock?" Kirk inquired.

"Kirrik," it said, then looked over toward the doctor. "Ick-koy," it said and then tried to say something else, but it could not make them understand. The bird pointed its head inland several times repeating their names. The two humans exchanged glances. The bird pulled away from Kirk's hands and fluttered over to the doctor, gazing at him intently. McCoy rubbed his forehead uneasily. "Ick-koy," it repeated and gestured with its head again.

"Jim, do you suppose something's wrong at the village and he knows?" McCoy asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, he decided "I'd better go check on the colonists; be right back."

"Now who's playing hunches?" Kirk teased. McCoy grimaced and left without comment. "What's going on, hmm?" Kirk smiled at the bird and stretched out by the fire. The bird huddled in the crook of his arm. He sat up uneasily as Little Spock made a high keening cry. "Something's definitely wrong, isn't it?" Kirk frowned.

McCoy pushed his way through the underbrush, slapping at insects with disgust, and peered out into the clearing. The colonists were gathered around fires singing and laughing. All seemed well. Then McCoy stiffened. He heard what sounded like a trumpet! Several trumpets! Three huge shapes suddenly appeared over the village. They were large golden birds, their eyes blazing red in the firelight. Women screamed as the three birds hovered over the clearing, their wings fanning the fires while colonists ran for their shelters. McCoy noticed two small white birds fluttering up and down and chattering at the giant birds as they appeared to be scanning the humans. McCoy instinctively dropped down behind a bush as the huge birds separated. One zeroed in on Hutchens, who screamed and ran helplessly. He was seized by large talons as the bird swooped over him. The creature carried him high above the clearing, then released him with a loud trumpeting. Hutchens' screams ended abruptly as he hit the ground with a thud. McCoy closed his eyes tightly and shuddered. When he dared open his eyes, the murderer had left. The other two circled around a moment longer while the two small white birds chattered. Then they left as well. The golden creatures circled once more then flew toward the beach, passing over McCoy's hiding place as he dove under it. A sudden horrible thought tore through the doctor.

"Jim!" he shouted, his fear forgotten as he stumbled to his feet and ran desperately after the horrendous creatures.

When the two huge golden birds flew into sight, Kirk stared in amazement. Kirk reached for the tricorder on his belt and switched it on.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk on the planet's surface. There seems to be an error in the preliminary survey report," he reported. "There are gigantic gold birds with a wing spread of approximately two to three meters. More information is needed before..." he froze. Little Spock had started chirping with excitement as the creatures turned, apparently to dive at them. Kirk did not bother trying to hide but did pick up a piece of driftwood out of the fire and waited calmly. Little Spock pulled away and fluttered onto the beach, chattering.

"Come back, Spock!" Kirk shouted, as one of the large birds dove and scooped his small acquaintance up in its wide bill. Kirk yelled and flung the driftwood at its head. The creature trumpeted and dropped little Spock. The second bird attacked Kirk as he reached for another piece of wood. Kirk crumbled, stunned by the blow, and looked up

to see talons posed to strike. Expecting the worse, he shut his eyes; however, Little Spock fluttered to his side and stood on his chest, attempting to spread his wings protectively over the human, protesting loudly. The huge bird trumpeted back as Kirk opened his eyes to see the other golden bird loom over him as well. They both gazed at the human intently. Kirk felt a faint buzzing in his head and blinked his eyes, attempting to dispell the sensation. Then, one of the birds opened its bill beside little Spock and nudged the white bird. Little Spock climbed within, peered out at Kirk, and chirruped reassuringly. The second bird grasped Kirk with its talons and lifted him as they both rose above the beach.

Kirk looked down as the golden birds circled the main island. The talons were gripping his sides painfully -- feeling much like knives through his clothes -- but he carefully switched his tricorder back on.

"If anyone finds this," he said quietly, "I am Captain Kirk of the starship **Enterprise**. Please return this tricorder to Mr. Spock, first officer... I am being carried to an unknown destination by one of the gigantic golden birds inhabiting this planet. They resemble a cross between two earth birds -- an eagle and a pelican. They have large gold feathers and the basic build of huge eagles, except for longer necks. They also have a wide bill and a pouch similar to a pelican. I suspect the small white birds are their young, such as the one I rescued from a creature resembling an alligator-fish, is presently riding in the other bird's mouth. Mr. Spock, I think a closer study will prove 'fascinating' as you would say. Under no circumstances are the white birds to be harmed. I have found them to be loyal, friendly, and intelligent, and definitely non-hostile. The one I rescued actually saved my life when one of the parents was attacking me.

Wait! I think I see our destination now. One of the mountains inland appears to be hollow, and seems to be a nesting place for the golden birds. I suspect it is either volcanic or contains hot springs because of the steam rising from within it. It is likely the latter, since hot springs would probably make an ideal nesting site. Yes, we are circling lower now. I am going to detach my tricorder and drop it in the hopes of it being recovered since my... my own future appears dim at the moment," he added ruefully. Then he instructed, with affection, "Mind the store for me, Spock," and carefully eased the tricorder off his belt as his captor began zeroing in its approach to the hollow mountain. Kirk prayed that the tricorder was sturdy enough to survive the fall. As they descended lower, the human could make out individual nesting sites scattered around the hot springs within the hollow. He also realized he was correct about the white birds, as there were one or two in each nest. Kirk was suddenly released about a dozen feet above a nest. He fell helplessly, striking his head on a rock, and lost consciousness.

Leonard McCoy scrambled out onto the beach just as the birds were carrying off Kirk. McCoy stood horrified, and expected to see Kirk dashed to the ground like Hutchens. However, the creatures kept flying, carrying his friend away with them.

"Jim!!" McCoy shouted, staring after them. When they were out of sight, McCoy turned and headed back to the village dejectedly. He attempted to control his grief but tears ran down his face. How could he ever face Spock? He had sworn Kirk would be



better off recovering in the fresh air and sunshine instead of in sickbay all week. But, it was not his fault, Dr. McCoy told himself. That damned survey had said nothing about the giant birds. At least he could tell Spock that the Captain had gone to his death bravely, calmly, without a struggle or scream, unlike Hutchens. Oh, Jim... perhaps it would have been better for him to have been dashed to his death. Would he be eaten by those creatures? he wondered with a shudder, then wiped at his eyes fiercely as he entered the clearing. No time for grief -- he had a job to do. He was in charge. McCoy approached the group around Hutchens' body. May as well help here, he thought. Gotta keep my mind off things.

When McCoy's communicator beeped the following night, he gave a start of surprise. The Enterprise was early. They must have done warp 9 coming back. Could Spock suspect somehow? Of course, he thought. Spock always knows when Jim's in trouble.

"McCoy here," he responded, a lead weight in his stomach in anticipation of having to face Spock.

"Uhura here, Doctor. Mr. Spock is on his way to the transporter," a soft voice told him. "The colonists and medical personnel will be joining you soon."

"Hold the colonists," he instructed. "Send Spock alone and right here to the infirmary so no one else sees him. There's no immediate danger," he added quickly before she could ask. "I'll explain to him when he gets here. How did you get back so fast?"

"Mr. Spock seemed to think there was some urgency," she replied in a questioning tone.

"Wonder how he knew..." McCoy muttered. "thanks, Uhura. McCoy out."

A moment later, he heard the hum of the transporter as Spock materialized at the infirmary entrance.

"Doctor," Spock stated. "What has happened to the Captain... is..."

"The birds here are hostile," McCoy interrupted. "and I suspect they have some intelligence." he added.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? But, where is the Captain?"

"Come with me, Spock," McCoy gestured toward his office, away from curious patients. "I've... got some bad news, Spock," he muttered, avoiding the Vulcan's intent gaze.

"Is the Captain seriously injured?" Spock inquired calmly.

McCoy eyed him a moment, unable to put Spock off any longer. "I'm afraid so..." McCoy admitted, then gave Spock a sharp look. "But you already know that; you always know, though I don't understand how."

"That is not important now -- where is he?" Spock glanced around the infirmary.

"Spock... he's..." McCoy floundered then took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, but I believe Jim's dead."

Spock froze a moment, a far-away look in his eyes. "No, Doctor. The Captain is alive," he corrected with assurance.

"Damn it, Spock, how could you possibly know!?" McCoy exploded, bitterness evident in his tone. "Look at this!" McCoy grabbed Kirk's torn and bloodied tunic and thrust it toward the Vulcan. "He was carried off by giant golden birds. They killed Hutchens then grabbed Jim. Last night one of them dropped his tunic in the clearing with a devilish scream. What else could this mean other than they've killed him and want us to know!"

Spock examined the tunic. "Doctor, please calm yourself. The Captain was injured but I believe he lives. Because of our mind-link, I would know otherwise. Now, please continue your report with a little less emotion, I wish the facts only."

McCoy bristled and started to make a sarcastic retort but decided better of it when he met Spock's eyes. Spock said nothing further, merely gazing at him quietly while the human pulled himself together. Was there a really possibility that Jim was alive? McCoy felt a faint hope and cleared his throat.

"All right, here's your facts," McCoy muttered and proceeded to tell the Vulcan about the colonists shooting the sea birds, the golden birds killing Hutchens, then carrying off the Captain. Then he added, "Also, we are being spied on. Every time anyone attempts to leave the clearing, a bunch of the grey birds bombard us with bird droppings and small rocks."

"Fascinating," Spock commented.

"But it's the white ones that Jim..." his voice faltered a moment, then continued, "that Jim and I think are possibly intelligent." He told the Vulcan about the autopsies and Kirk's pet bird... how he had rescued it and refractured his left leg in the process. "Jim calls it 'Little Spock'" McCoy told him.

"Little... 'Spock'?" Spock raised an eyebrow.

McCoy grinned mischievously. "Yes, Jim said it had the same look you do in its beady little eyes." McCoy explained -- though not quite how Jim would have. "You know... the look you get..."

"That's quite enough, Doctor," Spock interrupted. "I shall mount a full-scale search for the Captain. We will scan the area for readings on the nesting sites of the golden birds. Any suggestions?"

"Yes," McCoy nodded. "They headed for the mountains inland. But it will take days to..." "

"Not necessarily," Spock cut him short. "We will, of course, scan for a human life form."

"You... really think Jim is alive?" McCoy asked, not able to keep hope out of his voice.

"As I said, doctor. If the golden entities are intelligent, they may have merely wished to study a human closely. And, the Captain has a certain 'knack', I believe you would say, of extricating himself from the most difficult situations," Spock reminded McCoy dryly.

"Well, I want to go with you, should you find him." McCoy said with determination. "He's hurt; he'll need me."

Spock inclined his head. "I shall keep you informed of my progress. Until this situation is resolved, I will not transport any additional colonists to the surface. However, extra supplies and medical personnel will be sent immediately. Also," Spock added as he flipped open his communicator, "you may inform the others that although there were more injuries, fortunately none are life-threatening."

"Well, that's good news, at least," McCoy smiled, as Spock was transported back on board the **Enterprise**.

Spock and the rest of the crew zealously worked all night, searching the inland mountain range for signs of the Captain or the nesting site. It was dawn as the rising sun glinted on a tiny metallic device.

"Meester Spock!" Chekov called with excitement. "We have located something!"

"Full magnification, Mr. Sulu," Spock commanded.

"It looks like a tricorder," Sulu commented in a questioning tone.

"Beam it aboard and have it brought to the bridge," Spock directed. When it arrived, Spock inspected the battered tricorder. "It appears to be functional," he murmured and flipped the switch. Captain Kirk's voice filled the bridge and his crew listened in awe.

"A hollow mountain," Sulu exclaimed, as he and Chekov peered over the survey charts of the area. He then pointed to an area on the chart. "That one looks like it could be hollow... yes, Mr. Spock, here it is!"

"Plot the coordinates, Mr. Sulu. Lt. Uhura, contact Dr. McCoy and have him prepare to beam aboard shortly. Mr. Chekov, scan the area for life forms," Mr. Spock ordered.

"I have them, seer," Chekov called excitedly. "A large gathering of alien life-forms and... and one human!"

Spock heard sighs of relief go around the bridge. "Lt. Uhura, notify Dr. McCoy we have found the Captain and to beam up," he directed.

"Sir..." Uhura frowned after speaking with the doctor. "Dr. McCoy reports that a group of colonists are demanding to come along."

Spock considered the demand for a moment. "It seems a logical request. Have them select two, preferably a married couple, and tell them Dr. Starkes will also represent them." Uhura looked back at him curiously as she passed along his reply.

When McCoy and the two colonists were beamed aboard, Spock was waiting for them with Dr. George Starkes, the leader of the colonists, and two security men. "I have decided a shuttlecraft would be more appropriate under the circumstances," Spock explained. "We do not want to..."

"Jim's really alive?" McCoy interrupted, excitement evident in his tone.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I assured you of that earlier, Doctor." He then turned to the man and woman with McCoy and acknowledged them.

"This is Ben and Janet Crow," McCoy introduced them with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. "Seemed rather appropriate somehow, wouldn't you say?"

Spock merely gave him a blank look, then said to the colonists, "There must be no violence -- the Captain's safety can not be jeopardized. Is that understood?" Ben and Janet Crow nodded.

"Only in self-defense," Dr. Starkes agreed.

"But, why a shuttlecraft, Spock?" McCoy couldn't resist asking, as Spock led the way into the shuttlecraft.

"As I attempted to explain earlier," Spock commented, "to suddenly materialize in the nesting site of an alien species could cause considerable harm -- not to mention endanger the Captain's life. Our craft will be observed on its approach and, hopefully, the Captain can explain its purpose," Spock said as they all settled into their seats.

"If he's in shape to explain anything," McCoy reminded. "He may be alive but he was badly hurt."

Spock ordered the shuttle bay doors opened without comment.

James Kirk became aware that he was cold. He opened his eyes, shivering, and noticed that his shirt was missing. He winced as he forced himself upright. His head was pounding and the gashes in his sides had crusted over with dried blood, where the giant bird's talons had gripped him.

"Kirrik!" came a cry. Kirk squinted and saw the white bird sitting on his cast.

"Hello, Little Spock," he murmured.

"Kaa!" it cried and flapped its wings. "Kaa, Kaa!"

A dark shadow loomed over Kirk. It was one of the golden birds perching on the rim of the nest. The huge bird lowered its head and rubbed against Little Spock; then turned toward the human, staring with blazing red eyes. Kirk again felt a faint buzzing in his head and shook it, trying to clear it. The gold bird gave a cry and was joined by what Kirk presumed to be its mate. They both stared long and hard into Kirk's eyes. Both the dizziness and the buzzing increased. Kirk fought it at first then a suspicion struck him.

"Are you telepathic?" he queried. "If so, try again. I'll prepare." Kirk attempted to relax and open his mind as if Spock was mind-touching with him. The buzzing then became a whisper.

Can you hear now, oh wingless one?

"Yes!" he cried triumphantly. A ripple of amusement went through his mind.

You may speak normally to us; we hear your thoughts... why have the wingless ones come to our territory?

"We come in peace," Kirk replied quickly, "We mean you no harm."

This is false... One of our young was murdered; one was injured... you are not here in peace. We have taken a death for a death. As for you... we will defend your life at Council because you saved our child, but you may die if the others overrule us... then all wingless ones will be driven away or killed. Our nesting place must be protected.

"The other humans -- wingless ones -- did not know your children were of an intelligent species," Kirk argued. "They were seeking food. But once they know the truth..."

Enough! he was interrupted. **You may speak at Council. We will speak for you, as you were separate from the others... and did no harm... rescuing our nestling from death. Until the Council meets you will nest in peace with us.**

"Thank you," Kirk bowed his head courteously to them, then asked "When will the Council meet?" Should the colonists need removal quickly, Kirk hoped there would be

time for the **Enterprise** to return. It would be crowded -- but certainly a preferable alternative to death.

We must send for the others -- in fact, word has already gone out. We will start council at the next sunrise... Suddenly, one of the golden birds bent closer, its head only inches from Kirk's face. **Pain...** it said and turned to its mate. **Apart from the leg-thing...** They gazed at each other a moment then the first one whispered, **I will tend your injuries...**

You wingless ones are easily harmed; it was not intended, the second one apologized. Looking from one bird to the other, Kirk got the impression the first bird was female. Kirk again felt amusement in his mind.

Yes, I am Kea, nest mother; my nest mate is Eek.

The male bobbed his head. **I have something to attend to while Kea treats your injuries.**" Kirk watched with puzzlement as Eek picked up the human's torn tunic and flew off. Before he could inquire why, Kea jumped into the nest. Kirk's eyes widened; but he tried to hide his fear as she settled down around him. Little Spock gave a joyful squeak and crawled under a wing.

Kea gazed at Kirk. **Are you able to receive my thoughts alone?** she inquired softly.

"Why, yes; perhaps because you are so close," Kirk said wryly. Her amusement rippled through his mind, then something else. The female was projecting something oddly familiar into Kirk's mind, something he had not experienced for a long time. Very pleasant, soothing, reassuring...

"Mother!" he said in sudden understanding.

Yes... she whispered reassuringly. I will not harm you, nest brother to my male-child, Kaa.

"Kaa?" Kirk wondered.

His name is Kaa; why do you call him Ssspock? He has told you his name.

Kirk chuckled. "Of course! I didn't realize. Kaa reminded me of a friend who's telepathic -- his name is Spock; now I know why."

Kea then did something very strange to Kirk. He watched as she plucked a golden feather from her wing. She held it in her beak and bent her head over the human. He saw a large oily droplet on the feather's stalk. She touched Kirk's left side with it then stroked his lacerations with the feathery end. The pain vanished. Kirk gasped as he watched the wounds vanish also. Kea calmly plucked another feather and repeated the treatment to his other side. He was filled with amazement. Wait until Bones finds out about this, he thought to himself.

"Thank you, nest mother," he said politely when she finished. Then a horrible thought occurred to him. What if the wrong people find out about this? He quickly tried to suppress it, not wanting Kea to pick it up.

Kea moved to Kirk's leg. This strange hardness is the same as Kaa's. My son says it is your way to heal. May it be removed without causing further injury?

"Can your blood heal bones?" he asked with interest.

Kaa tried to tell you but... our young project more strongly as they mature, she turned her head and chirruped softly. The young white bird crawled from beneath her. Kea pecked her son's leg cast gently, then gave a sharp blow. Kaa squawked as the cast split. Kea cooed at her son, then plucked a feather, dribbling her oily blood on the broken leg. Kirk watched with fascination as it mended before his eyes. Little Kaa gave a pleased chirp and hopped about joyfully. Kirk chuckled.

Kaa cocked his head and gazed at the human. "Kirrik?" he inquired, pecking at Kirk's cast.

"I don't know," Kirk answered. "My leg bones are harder than yours."

Kea gazed at him. I will try if you wish?

Kirk hesitated, considering the offer. "I'll think about it," he decided.

If you prefer... she whispered, pecking over it curiously. She inspected him a moment. Your head troubles you; I have no remedy for it. You must sleep now... Kirk stiffened as the female lowered her body onto him, tucking in her legs. Kirk gasped for breath, expecting to be suffocated. However, to his surprise, just enough air filtered through her downy soft underfeathers to breathe. There was warmth, blessed warmth! -- and, softness. He had never felt so... so protected... not since... Kirk relaxed and drifted off to sleep.

Kirk wakened as the mother bird rose up to perch on the rim of her nest just before dawn. He lifted himself on an elbow and watched as a couple grey gulls dropped fish into the nest. Little Kaa scrambled for one and Kea swallowed down another.

"Good morning, nest-mother," Kirk said politely. She bobbed her head. "Why do the grey birds fish for you?" he asked.

It is a temporary arrangement she whispered in his mind. We did not wish to be seen by you wingless ones until we learned of your nature. You may eat, Kirrik. Captain Kirk looked doubtfully at the fish she dropped on his lap. He shrugged and started to raise it to his mouth but was interrupted by the white bird hopping on his cast and chattering.

My son says you prefer yours in a container of hot liquid, she explained. You may make use of our hot springs below, she gestured with her head.

"Thank you," he smiled and peered out of the nest. The nearest bubbling pit was only about 50 yards away. He climbed gingerly out of the nest and lowered himself to the ground, having to drop the last few feet. He landed painfully on his injured leg and grimaced. Maybe I should have taken Kea's offer to have my leg treated, he thought wryly, limping to the hot spring. As he speared his fish on a whitened piece of driftwood and steamed it, Kirk looked around with interest. A group of golden birds was beginning to gather for the sunrise council meeting in the center of the volcanic crater. They made no sound but Kirk suspected they were speaking telepathically. Other golden

birds, probably females, were scattered about, one to each nest engaged in feeding the young. Kirk decided they had no particular breeding cycle as some were setting on unhatched eggs, one or two to a nest, while others were feeding babies the size of little Kaa. Some had young mottled gold and white, nearly as large as the parents. Kirk ate his steamed fish and cupped some water in his hands from a cooler puddle to drink, then started back to Kea's nest.

However, another golden bird landed before him, blocking his way, and hissed. **Wingless monster!!** the hatred of the creature tore through his mind. **Murderer of children!!** It swiped at him with a talon and Kirk dropped flat just in time.

No, Heta! Kea cried out, landing protectively on top of the human. **You killed the murderer.**

All are murderers of our grey brothers, Heta screeched.

Not the one called Kirrik. This one saved Kaa. He awaits the council, Kea said firmly.

I shall vote 'death' as shall the others, Heta gave a last angry hiss and flew back to her empty nest. Kea picked the human up gently in her talons and flew with him back to her own nest.

At sunrise Kirk was flown to the center of the large circle of golden birds. He seemed to feel all their minds concentrating on him.

We are the Peleaguls; one called Kirrik. Why have the wingless ones come to our domain? The voiceless thought pierced his mind like a knife.

He winced, then drew himself upright and straightened his shoulders. "I am Captain James T. Kirk of the starship **Enterprise**. We... "

What is a starship? he was interrupted.

"Since we do not have wings, we build giant metal birds to fly us much the way you carry your young. The **Enterprise** is one of the largest of these metal birds and I command her. We come in peace on a rescue mission."

Peace? What peace? They murder our young! one protested fiercely.

Kirk suspected the protestor was Heta. "That was a... a terrible misunderstanding," Kirk spread his hands. "I can promise it won't happen again."

Explain 'rescue mission', he was asked.

Kirk took a deep breath and told about the colonists' village being destroyed and their need to be quickly relocated. "The colonists wish to grow food and raise their young in peace," Kirk said earnestly. "They did not know there was intelligent life here. Our survey did not indicate your presence. They lost all their supplies and merely thought they were hunting for food when the child was killed," he explained. "I believe our peoples can live together in peace. Both cultures would benefit. However, if your council rules against us I will take them away in my metal bird. Although, there are several of us injured and we would appreciate time to treat them. We would have to

locate another place for them to settle," Kirk continued. "There is no need for violence on either side."

We can heal the injured, Kea's voice whispered gently through his mind.

They should all be killed! Heta's voice screeched.

The wingless ones will truly leave if we ask? another queried doubtfully.

"Yes, I promise," Kirk assured them, "but I hope we can work things out."

You can speak for your people? a voice asked.

Kirk thought carefully before answering. This was a new culture. Would it be wrong to explain about the Federation? Could they understand the concept of life on other planets? Kirk decided that he would have to try, for their own safety. If unscrupulous beings found out about the healing properties of their blood -- he quickly banished the thought.

"I am not one of the colonists," he explained. "I am a representative of the United Federation of Planets. We are a group made up of numerous life forms across the galaxy. We trade with each other and protect each others' homes from invasion by enemies. I think you would enjoy exchanging ideas and trading goods with us. Or, if you prefer, we can protect your homeland from contact with any outsiders and leave you strictly alone. But wouldn't it be preferable to learn from each other and live in peace? However, the choice is yours. I will convey your decision to the others," Kirk concluded. Abruptly, he felt very strange. He swayed dizzily. All the birds were staring at him intently, concentrating. He realized they were examining his thoughts. He tried to relax and open his mind more freely. He had spoken the truth and had nothing to hide.

This one is good; he has done us no harm, Eek, Kea's mate, spoke up. **You all see the truth of his words.**

But, can the others be trusted? one asked.

The concept of your Federation is intriguing, one commented.

They hunt our young for food! one screeched in horror.

I cannot believe in a giant metal bird carrying these wingless ones, one scoffed.

Kirk smiled and made a command decision. "You will be welcome to send a representative onto my metal bird," he suggested. "It will be here soon with the rest of the colonists."

There were several whistles, seemingly of approval, Kirk thought. But another bird argued, **But how can we trust these creatures not to murder the one who goes?**

"I shall guarantee his safety with my life," Kirk said simply. They all gazed at him intently and he stood calmly, awaiting their decision.

This one may not be typical of his species; he was dwelling apart, one argued. There were other murmurs of agreement in his mind. We need others to examine. Let us confer.

We shall now take council, a voice announced. Kea, remove him.

Kea gently carried Kirk back to the nest, chirruped reassuringly, and returned to the others.

The council was in session for over an hour when Kirk gave a start of surprise. What he had assumed to be an approaching bird was a shuttlecraft on the horizon. Kirk rose to his feet. The **Enterprise** was early. Their sudden arrival at this time might cause trouble. Could he summon Kea? He wondered. Kirk concentrated on the nest mother. Little Kaa hopped close, staring at him, then also faced toward the council. A golden bird rose gracefully into the air and glided to the rim of the nest.

You are in need, Kirrik? He was finding it much easier to receive her thoughts the longer he knew her.

"I wished to tell you my ship has returned and my friends are coming for me," Kirk said.

Kea dipped her head to regard him. My mate Eek returned your shredded covering. They will think you dead.

Kirk shook his head. "One of my friends, Spock, the one I named your son for, is telepathic. He knows I live and where I am. See?" Kirk pointed. "They are coming."

Kea stretched her neck and stared at the approaching craft. Come, she scooped up Kirk and flew back to the council. Kirrik's metal bird is here, she announced to the assembled birds. There was an immediate uproar.

"They come in peace!" Kirk protested above the assorted squawks, as they were obviously preparing to defend their nests.

As the shuttle landed, Heta screeched. You have led them to our nesting site! All our young will be murdered! She dove at Kirk just as the shuttle door opened. Monster!

Eek intercepted her and Kea quickly settled down on top of Kirk protectively. No, Heta! Eek hissed.

The shuttle door opened and the two Security men sprang out followed by Spock and Dr. McCoy.

"Don't shoot!" Kirk's voice was muffled as one of the Security men pointed his phaser at the bird seeming to be attacking the Captain, but Spock quickly deflected his aim. The other guard chose to fire at the white bird heading toward Dr. McCoy.

"No!" McCoy cried, but was too late. With a squeak, little Kaa flopped to the ground. Dr. McCoy bent over the bird in dismay. With a terrible cry, Eek charged the Security Guard, raking his shoulder open as the bird's talons grabbed for the phaser.

As the other guard whirled to fire at Eek, Kirk shouted again, "Spock, stop him!" Spock applied his Vulcan nerve pinch just in time. Kea landed beside McCoy, who stayed perfectly still as the golden bird nudged the body of her son.

"He's only stunned," McCoy said, hoping she would understand. Kea raised her head and gazed at him intently. However, McCoy's eyes suddenly focused on Kirk as the Captain limped up to them. "Jim!" McCoy cried joyfully, hugging Kirk, then giving him a shake. "I thought you were dead! But Spock was right, as usual." McCoy glanced over toward the Vulcan.

Kirk grinned, then looked over the doctor's shoulder to meet Spock's eyes. "Aren't you a little early, Mr. Spock?" he teased.

The Vulcan performed a quick inspection of his friend, his glance resting a moment on Kirk's leg cast. "You look remarkably fit, Captain, under the circumstances," Spock said evenly, avoiding a direct reply.

Kirk nodded ruefully. "I believe you'll find the explanation fascinating. They are telepathic," he warned as the others came out of the shuttle. He turned to McCoy. "How's Little Spock?" Spock's eyebrow shot up but Kirk did not notice. The white bird began to stir and chirrup weakly.

"He'll be fine..." McCoy replied, "but Connors is hemorrhaging. I must transport him to the ship to treat him."

"Wait," Kirk looked at Kea, who was stroking her son with her head. "Nestmother," he bowed to her, "Would you heal this man?"

He injured my son! she hissed.

"If you look into his thoughts you will see that he was only defending our healer," Kirk gestured at McCoy, "and he could have killed, if he had wished." Kea stared at him then bent over the injured Connors, who flinched fearfully away. "Hold still, Connors, she's a healer," Kirk ordered. He glanced around to see the rest of the council of golden birds surrounding them.

He leaned closer to the Vulcan. "Spock, can you project peace and goodwill toward them? They will want to enter your mind," he warned. The Vulcan closed his eyes and concentrated. "All of you," Kirk gestured to Dr. Starkes and the two colonists, "Try not to be afraid. This is the Council. They are here to decide whether our two species can live in peace. I promised them we'd all leave if they decide against us."

"Leave?" Starkes protested and the Crows exchanged looks of dismay.

"Don't worry; we can relocate you if necessary," Kirk assured them. "The Peleaguls are the intelligent life form on this planet. If they prefer to remain in isolation, the Federation will respect their decision. I hope it won't be necessary."

Meanwhile, Dr. McCoy had been watching Kea remove a feather and touch it to Connor's injured shoulder. The gashes healed before his eyes. "That's incredible!" he exclaimed, "May I examine that feather?"

Kea turned her head to regard him. McCoy felt a strange tickling in his head and shook it. Little Kaa hopped over to him and chirruped to him and then to his mother. Kirk turned to McCoy and said, "Just relax and let her enter your mind. That's how they communicate." Knowing Bones' dislike for such things, he added, "Bones, it's important that we cooperate as much as possible."

But McCoy shook his head again. "I'll try, Jim, but I won't promise anything. I see she means well, but you know I don't like anyone crawling around inside my head."

Kirk turned back to get Spock but hesitated. The Vulcan was obviously in communication with the Council. Kirk then spoke to Kea. "McCoy is a healer. It is he who fixed my leg, and your son's," Kirk tapped his cast.

Kea bobbed her head and stared at him. *My son has just informed me, Kirrik,* she handed him the feather with her beak and Kirk gave it to McCoy, who eagerly took out his medical scanner and tricorder.

"You know what this means, Jim?" he said with enthusiasm. "Why, people will come from all over the galaxy just to... to..." he stopped abruptly, concern now evident on his face.

Kirk nodded grimly. "That's what I thought."

"The Klingons would pluck every feather from their bodies," McCoy whispered in horror.

"Not just the Klingons," Kirk sighed. "If they don't join the Federation, any unscrupulous trader could destroy them if knowledge of this spread."

Spock suddenly opened his eyes. "The council wishes to examine the mated colonists."

"Hey!" Starkes protested, "I'm the one who should..."

"No, Sir," Spock interrupted politely, but firmly, "They specify the mated pair."

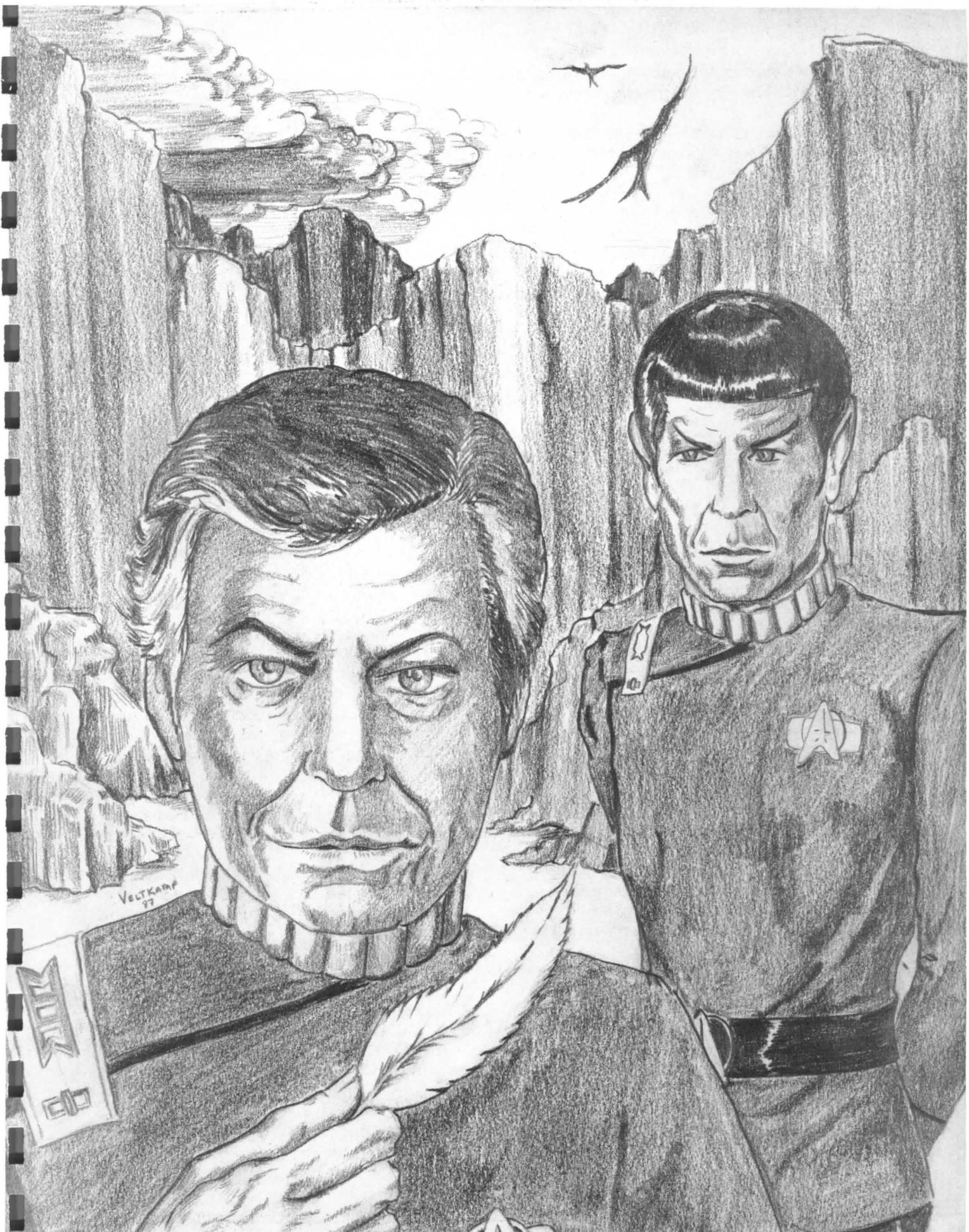
Ben and Janet Crow approached him timidly. "We are willing, Mr. Spock," Ben Crow said quietly. The Crows clasped hands and waited. Starkes drew back with reluctance.

"These two are typical representatives of the mated colonists," Spock said aloud. "Do not be afraid," he added to the Crows. "They wish to enter your minds. It is their way. Please try to relax and open your thoughts." The Crows nodded. They both felt a tickling in their minds that slowly intensified.

Can you understand us? said the whisper.

"Yes!" they both answered at once.

We are the Peleaguls; this is our nesting site. If we permit you to remain to nest and raise your young, will you promise not to injure our young and to not disturb our nesting grounds or those of our grey brothers? We will permit no weapons other than what would be necessary for you to catch fish.



"We can promise this but... there are others among us who will want to hunt for meat," Ben Crow replied with concern.

No weapons will be permitted, the council repeated. If you need the meat for survival, perhaps we can assist in the hunt.

"Yes!" Jan Crow nodded to her husband. "We could trade them fruits and vegetables from our crops."

That would be pleasing, the council agreed. Any wingless ones who object to being weaponless are not welcome. They must leave. Is this agreed? The Crows both nodded. If we decide you may stay this must be done.

"We will tell the others." As the council withdrew from their minds, the Crows blinked. Jan, still a little dazed, wobbled on her feet. As her husband took her arm, Spock, who had been observing closely, raised an eyebrow inquiringly.

"Was it successful?"

"Yes," Ben Crow nodded. "If they allow us to stay, it will have to be without weapons."

"Report, Mr. Spock," the Captain called to him.

Spock explained the situation and the Captain nodded. "The Federation will see that their wishes are carried out." Spock glanced over to where McCoy and the second security man were helping Connors to his feet. Spock's eyebrows shot up.

Seeing his puzzlement at the man's shoulder being healed, Kirk grinned. "Yes, Mr. Spock, I guess I need to explain. We must speak privately a moment..." Kirk turned to address Eek and Kea. "My friends and I need to confer. Will you excuse us?"

Eek bobbed his head and Kirk heard his voice whisper in his mind. We also need to council. Kirk bowed politely then drew Spock over to McCoy while Dr. Starkes talked with the Crows. McCoy was checking his results from testing the feather. "Anything to report yet, Bones?"

McCoy looked up. "It's absolutely remarkable, Jim. There's some sort of healing properties in their blood. I can't begin to analyze it here. I'll need to run tests in the lab, but Connors is fine now."

"I was pretty badly scratched up myself," Kirk informed him and turned to Spock. "Kea plucked a feather from her wing and healed Connors with the fluid on it; she did the same with me." Kirk pointed at his unmarked chest.

"Fascinating," Spock commented.

"Well, it raises a problem, Spock," Kirk frowned. "If it becomes widely known that their blood heals, there would be a massacre if we aren't careful."

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "It would be logical for them to join the Federation, if only for protection."

"Do you think Kea would let us take blood samples from her and her mate?" McCoy asked Spock hopefully. "Will you ask her?"

"Why do you not ask them yourself, Doctor," Spock queried.

McCoy bristled. "I'm no telepath!"

Spock regarded him and raised an eyebrow. "Neither are the Crows, Doctor; you need only let them into your mind." McCoy tried to restrain a shudder at the thought and turned away.

Kirk eyed him. "Spock has a point. And, besides, you did say you would try."

"Jim, you know how I feel about that." McCoy argued.

"Are you concerned that the Peleaguls will discover your mental deficiencies, Doctor?" Spock commented sarcastically.

McCoy glared at the Vulcan and Kirk tried not to smile. "Cut it out, Spock. Not everyone likes others reading their thoughts. But, Bones, please give it a try. It's not so bad, especially with Kea. She..." a faraway look came into his eyes and he grew silent for a moment, then continued. "Well, anyways, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

McCoy glanced over to where the Peleaguls were conferring. "Wouldn't want to disturb them; guess it will have to wait," he muttered in relief.

Just then Dr. Starkes and the Crows joined them. "Some of the men won't like being without weapons," Starkes warned.

"Then they will have to leave," Spock stated.

"Now, look..." Starkes began to protest.

"George, you have my word. Anyone who has to leave, be it a few or all of you, will be relocated," Kirk promised. "Now, how about it?"

"I have no problem with it personally," Starkes answered and shrugged his shoulders. "And I don't mind sharing the planet with them. I just hope they will let us stay."

"Good," Kirk gave a relieved sigh. "You talk to your people, George."

Just then, the Peleaguls suddenly dispersed, Kea and Eek coming over to the humans. Kea bobbed her head and said to the anxious humans. **We cease for today to feed our young and ourselves, then rest for the night. We will reconvene with the rising sun. The others may leave but it is requested that you stay, Kirrik.**

Spock directed a look of concern at his friend, but Kirk ignored him and said easily, "Of course," and then gestured toward McCoy. "Our healer has a request."

She bobbed her head and turned to face a startled McCoy. He froze as she enclosed him within her wings. When she released him, he stood in a daze as she scooped Kirk up gently in her talons and flew to her nest.

"Goodnight!" the Captain called.

Spock stood, staring after him until Eek said, gently. **Your nest brother will be safe. You all may go to your nesting place as well**, he gestured at the shuttle then flew off after his mate.

Spock went to McCoy's side. "Are you quite all right?" he inquired.

"Indescribable..." McCoy murmured.

"Doctor?" Spock said with concern.

McCoy blinked. "Oh! Hello Spock. Where's Jim?"

"I fear the Captain has been taken hostage," Spock pointed at the nest.

"Oh... well, don't worry, he'll be fine," McCoy said reassuringly, "Kea won't let anything happen to him." Spock's eyebrow shot up in astonishment at the doctor's sudden change in attitude. "Let's get back to the ship," McCoy picked up his equipment and took Connor's arm. "I'm going to check you out, young man."

"Haven't you forgotten to take blood samples?" Spock reminded.

"I've got Kea's," McCoy grinned. "And, she told me only the females are healers," he held up a sealed feather in a sample container. "She also requested this be kept secret -- she's not sure the other Peleaguls would agree to her allowing me to examine it. I'll run tests on it. If we can duplicate the chemical components it could revolutionize medicine" he said as they entered the shuttle.

"Indeed," Spock agreed, looking at him with interest, and pulled out his communicator. "Spock to the **Enterprise**."

"Scott here, Mr. Spock. How are things with the Captain?"

"The Captain is in good health. He and I will be remaining here tonight. We will be conferring with the native intelligence of this planet in the morning. Prepare to beam up the rest of the landing party from within the shuttle."

"Aye, Mr. Spock," Scotty cheerfully replied.

"Hey, I'm staying too, if you are," McCoy protested.

"That would be pointless, doctor," Spock commented. "I suggest you attend to your research on the blood sample and rejoin us in the morning."

McCoy glowered a moment indecisively, then gave in. "Guess you're right. Are you bedding down in the shuttle?"

"Affirmative," Spock replied and gestured to the Crows. "I suggest you return to the other colonists and explain the situation."

They nodded. "I should be here for the conference tomorrow," Dr. Starkes added firmly. "I am the elected leader of the colonists, you know."

"Indeed, I had planned on your presence. Tomorrow I will introduce you to them."

"About time," he muttered, but quieted when Spock raised an eyebrow.

"It was essential that the Peleaguls see the colonists as mated pairs needing a nesting site. Can you not understand the logic of this?"

"Yes, yes, of course," he sighed. "If only my wife could have come... "

Spock nodded in agreement. "I regret that she was one of the injured; however, she will recover."

McCoy pulled out his communicator. "McCoy here, five to beam up... try to stay out of trouble, Mr. Spock." He grinned at the Vulcan. They shimmered and vanished before he could retort.

Kirk spent a restful night, warm under Kea's feathers. In the morning she carried him to a hot spring to cook his breakfast fish. Little Kaa perched on his shoulder and watched with interest.

Kirk grimaced. "Hey, you're putting on weight, Spock." The bird chattered indignantly in his ear. "Sorry, I mean Kaa," he chuckled.

"Good morning, Captain," a voice called, "I trust you slept well?"

Kirk turned and smiled at Spock. "Good morning. Best night's sleep I've ever had. How about you?"

Spock inspected him a moment. "Adequate, Captain... Dr. McCoy returned to the ship with the others. I suspect he ran tests on the sample of Kea's blood through out the night."

"Probably," Kirk agreed.

Spock bent closer to observe the white bird on Kirk's shoulder. "Fascinating," he murmured as the bird returned his gaze. "He is telepathic as well, although his projection is considerably weaker than the adults'."

"I sensed he was, right from the start," Kirk said smugly. "That's why I named him Spock." The Vulcan raised an eyebrow in amusement at Kirk, who grinned in response. The shuttle door opened and Dr. Starkes appeared. "Did he spend the night too?" Kirk inquired.

"Negative, Captain," Spock explained. "I thought it best for us to transport back and forth from within the shuttle so as not to alarm the Peleaguls."

"Good idea, Spock," Kirk approved. "But, where's Bones?"

"The good doctor must still be involved in his research," Spock said dryly. "He will doubtless join us later."

Kirk nodded and, as he greeted Dr. Starkes, the Peleaguls began to gather. The three humans were asked to sit in the center of the circle of birds. They conferred all morning, obviously in disagreement over the colonists being allowed to stay.

Who is this wingless one? they asked at last.

"This is Dr. Starkes, the elected leader of the colonists," Spock explained.

Starkes suddenly felt all their minds concentrating on him and he gave a polite bow. He then relaxed and allowed the Peleaguls to enter his mind. He had been briefed by Mr. Spock and was prepared.

Where is your mate? he was asked.

"She was hurt by the quakes that caused us to come here," he said, not able to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

He felt a sudden surge of sympathy from some of them and they stirred, communicating with each other a moment. **Are there many of your kind injured?** a query came.

"Quite a few; if we have to leave, we really need some time for them to recover," Starkes replied. There was another rustle among them and they stared at him intently. Beads of sweat broke out on his face as he felt them penetrating his mind.

"There is no cause for alarm, Dr. Starkes," Spock said reassuringly. "Remember, it is merely their way to communicate. Relax." Starkes swallowed and took a couple deep breaths.

Concentrate on your memory of the quakes, and the injuries, came the Peleagul's whisper in his mind. However, Starkes main memory was of his wife, as their home collapsed around them. Her injuries were more serious than the others and she was still unconscious from a head injury. After a few moments they withdrew from his mind. He swayed as he regained his composure.

Kirk clutched his arm. "You ok, George?"

Starkes nodded and said weakly, "I just need to rest a bit." Kirk helped him over to a rock where he sat down relieved. Kirk then limped back to Spock's side.

The Peleaguls turned their attention toward Kirk. **Kirrik!** they called to him loudly. Little Kaa squawked indignantly as they ordered him to leave. **Kirrik!** they repeated. **Can there be trust between our peoples? We are evenly divided. Some of us are uncertain you won't retaliate for the death of the life we took. And can we trust your word? Do you trust ours?** they questioned.

"I trust Kaa and Kea and her mate," Kirk replied instantly. "With knowledge comes trust. Is that not a good beginning?"

Trust? one squawked loudly and regarded him with disdain. Kirk was able to actually feel her hostility. It was Heta. **Is it trust not to let Kea heal him?** A rustle went through the others.

Kirrik, why do you refuse Kea's healing? several others demanded.

"Not from lack of trust," Kirk protested. "Our bones differ from yours."

Your flesh differs as well but it was healed, they reminded. As a test of trust we request that you allow your leg to be tended.

"Very well," he agreed, secretly glad McCoy was not there to argue.

Not by Kea, by me, Heta insisted. Kirk stiffened in response to the suggestion.

No! Kea protested. Heta has attempted twice to take his life. I trust her not.

Her mate bobbed his head. **I too speak against this.**

Little Kaa chattered urgently into Spock's ear and his eyebrows shot up. He pushed his way through to his captain's side.

"No," Spock said firmly to the Peleaguls. "What you ask is not logical."

Kirk looked at the Vulcan in surprise. "How did you know what they wanted?"

"Kaa," Spock answered.

See? There can be no trust between our species, Heta said triumphantly.

"Wait!" Kirk shouted. "I'll accept the challenge if Heta promises no intentional harm."

"That is unwise," Spock whispered his objection in Kirk's ear.

"What choice have I got?" Kirk responded ruefully. "If she promises, I'll be ok."

The Peleaguls were staring at Heta, who had ruffled her feathers and hunched her head. Finally, she lifted it to gaze at Kirk. **I shall promise.**

Let the test begin, the Peleaguls murmured with excitement and backed away as Heta stalked through them, eyes fixed on Kirk, who awaited her calmly. Without warning, she swooped on the human and struck his leg cast a sharp blow. Kirk fell, wincing with pain, and bit his lip to keep from crying out as the cast split open.

"Jim!" Spock leaped in front of Heta and positioned himself between her and his friend. He spread his arms. "No!"

Suddenly, Kea and Eek positioned themselves on either side of the Vulcan. **We will not permit her to harm the innocent one,** they announced.

I will not harm him if he is truly innocent, Heta retorted, but drew back as Eek and Kea hissed.

If you break your promise and intentionally harm him you will be driven from our nesting grounds, Eek said firmly.

A rustle went through the other Peleaguls. That is fair, they agreed. Eek and Kea then withdrew, however Spock remained still.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk called in a gentle voice.

Spock stiffened but did not move. "I forbid it, Captain," he stated. "It is a medical decision. I will call Dr. McCoy." He pulled out his communicator with determination.

"Belay that, Mr. and that's a direct order," the Captain said crisply. Spock turned and looked down at him. Kirk met Spock's gaze for a long moment. "It's the logical thing to do," Kirk said softly. "Bones can fix me up again if necessary."

Spock's eyebrow went up. "Excellent though he may be, Dr. McCoy cannot as yet raise the dead."

"There's a first time for everything," Kirk grinned. "Now, move out of the way. She promised not to harm me. Besides, we really have no choice if we are to succeed here. I have to show I trust her."

Spock sighed. "Very well, Captain" he reluctantly moved back to Dr. Starkes, who had been watching anxiously.

Heta once again loomed over Kirk. Now, I shall have my revenge, she hissed into his mind.

Kirk was startled. "You would break your word? Why? What have I done? You have already killed the man who shot your child. They will banish you." he whispered back to her.

You are responsible for bringing the others, she hissed again. And, what care I for banishment? I have no child; my mate was killed while seeking food 23 sunsets ago so there will be no more young. I will kill all the wingless ones I can, she said bitterly.

"Revenge is wrong," Kirk said as Heta bent over him. "It will not bring back your child."

What do you know of loss? You who are mateless? she sneered. To lose a mate and child...

Kirk took a deep breath. "My mate... and child... were murdered," he said quietly, "but I took no revenge; see for yourself," he invited, focusing on his memories of Miramanee; their joy over the unborn child she insisted would be a son... her being stoned by the villagers for defending him. "I could have let them all be killed but I didn't. I saved their village from destruction with the help of my friend, Spock," he finished, once again feeling the pain and loneliness at the loss of the only family he had ever had. He sighed.

Heta was silent after studying his memories. Then she said, **You, Kirrik, are good; I would do much wrong to kill you**, she whispered in his mind. **But there is nothing for me now. You have your calling... I have nothing...** she said sadly.

"Why don't you choose another mate? Kirk suggested. "You are young and healthy. Have another child. At least you are a healer. That is something. Healers are greatly valued among my people and the others of the Federation."

She pondered his words a moment, inspecting him thoughtfully. **You may trust me now; I will heal your injury.** Heta bent over his leg and plucked out a feather, stroking the fluid onto his leg. She repeated her action twice more before she was satisfied. **Wait for it to work,** she whispered and continued to inspect him thoughtfully. **We mate for life, Kirrik,** she said gently into his mind, **but I am warmed by your concern. If the other wingless ones are similar to you, I will vote in their favor,** she assured him.

Kirk smiled with relief. "It was all a terrible mistake. But remember, among my people there are many individuals and, just as among yours, there are differences. Through knowledge of each other will come mutual trust and respect -- and friendship."

You are wise, she bobbed her head. **This is true... there, you may now stand,** she said finally.

Kirk got to his feet and gingerly put weight on his leg. "Thank you, Heta," he bowed.

Spock hurried to his side and passed a tricorder over Kirk's leg. "Appears functional, Captain, but Dr. McCoy must examine it. I would advise using it with caution."

"It's fine, Spock, good as new," Kirk assured him.

"It appeared to take a great deal of time, Captain." Spock commented with a question in his voice.

Kirk looked at him innocently. "Oh? We had things to discuss."

Kea came over and examined his leg also. **It is healed,** she bobbed her head.

Now, the council will vote, Eek announced. **You may withdraw.** Kirk, Spock and Starkes went back to the shuttle.

"Any rations left, Spock?" Kirk inquired hopefully. "I'm a bit tired of steamed fish."

"Indeed," Spock nodded and they all sipped coffee and munched ration bars while occasionally glancing over at the Peleagul's concave. While they ate, Starkes told Kirk of the colonists' reactions to the birdlife being intelligent.

"They found it hard to believe at first," he admitted. "But most of them will agree to give up their weapons if they can stay. This is a beautiful and fertile planet. Only seven of them want to leave, Mrs. Hutchens among them. She's rather bitter. Guess I can't blame her."

"I'll tell her about Heta's grief," Kirk said quietly.

"Think we'll get to stay?" Starkes asked.

"Try to relax, George," Kirk said sympathetically. "We've done the best we can. We can find you another planet if necessary. But what I'm really concerned about is the Peleaguls themselves. If they turn down joining the Federation, they'll be sitting ducks, if you pardon my pun," he quickly apologized.

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "It is unfortunate, but news of the remarkable healing properties of their blood will undoubtedly spread. The Federation can protect them."

"Yes," Kirk nodded, then his face lit up. "And they have much to offer besides their blood," he added as little Kaa flew back to his shoulder with a cheerful chirrup. Kirk stroked the bird a moment affectionately and sighed. "I'll miss you, Little Spock." The bird chirruped softly in his ear and bobbed its head toward Spock. "Sorry, I mean Kaa," Kirk corrected with a grin at the Vulcan.

The whine of the transporter sounded and Dr. McCoy materialized, eyes red-rimmed from researching all night. "Jim!" he exclaimed. "I..." he stopped abruptly and stared. "Your leg -- what's happened?"

"Rather a long story, Bones," Kirk murmured as McCoy pulled out his mediscanner.

"Seems perfectly all right," the doctor muttered, giving Kirk a frown. "You let Kea heal you." He said, obvious disapproval in his tone.

"Actually, it was Heta; but I'll explain later." Kirk interrupted McCoy's startled gasp, as the Peleaguls suddenly surrounded the shuttle.

Kirrik, Eek called.

"Wait in here, George," Kirk advised. "If there's any trouble you can call the ship." He straightened his shoulders and headed for the door, Spock and McCoy following. As they stood facing the Peleaguls, Eek bobbed his head.

Kirrik, we have agreed to let the colonists remain for a trial period. Our healers will intermingle with them and if there is no conflict you may nest and raise your young in peace.

McCoy gave a sigh of relief and Kirk smiled, and bowed. "We thank you."

Kirrik, we also wish a representative to accompany you to your meeting place to confer with your Federation. We will decide from her reports our final decision.

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances. "We will be honored to escort your ambassador," Kirk agreed. "I hope you will decide to join us. There are... other life forms in the galaxy who may not respect your nesting grounds and... the Federation will protect you from them," he said carefully. "Who is your representative?"

There was a rustle and Heta came forward. I am.

Spock raised an eyebrow and McCoy's mouth dropped open. Only Kirk seemed unsurprised. "Very appropriate," he bowed to her and she bobbed back. "How soon can you leave?"

She regarded him a moment. **I have no preparations to make, Kirrik.**

"Well, we have to make a few," he smiled at her. Kirk turned to the others. "Mr. Spock, see to the transporting down of the remaining colonists. Also, confiscate all phasers and beam up the seven who desire to leave."

"Affirmative, Captain," Spock nodded, pulling out his communicator.

"Bones, determine what medical supplies they'll need as well as anything else they'll need to hold them until a supply ship comes," he said to the doctor.

"I want to leave a couple medical personnel just in case, Jim," Dr. McCoy told him.

Kirk nodded. "Any luck with the blood tests?"

"That's what I came down to tell you," McCoy reported. "Couldn't isolate the healing agent. The blood loses its potency the longer it's out of the body, especially with exposure to the air."

"Logical," Spock commented. "We should have surmised that."

McCoy gave him an annoyed look. "Well, I've just spent all night proving it!"

Kirk interrupted his friends' interplay. "That simplifies things in the long run, though I realize you're disappointed, Bones."

"Indeed," Spock agreed as they exchanged glances, relieved that the Peleaguls would not be slaughtered for their blood.

Will you stay with us, Kirrik? My son wishes you for a nest brother, Kea invited.

Kirk was deeply moved. "Why... thank you... wish I could, but I have to escort your ambassador to the Federation; it's my responsibility. However..." he gazed at her a long moment. "I will always treasure the memory of you, my nest-mother. Your kindness to me... and the friendship of your son," he smiled at little Kaa and rubbed the bird's head, "will be with me always. I'd like to return and see what kind of an adult you turn into," he said to Kaa.

You will always be welcome, Kirrik, Kea said gently in his mind.

"Thank you," he murmured, stroking the white bird. "Now, don't take so many chances when you are fishing," Kirk directed.

Kaa rubbed his head against Kirk's cheek and said sadly, "Kirrik."

"Goodbye, little Spock..." he whispered then sat the bird down and quickly turned away.

Spock and McCoy exchanged glances. "Perhaps we'd better get him a tribble for his birthday," McCoy said in Spock's ear.

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow at him. "Indeed," he agreed as Kirk turned to Heta.

"Heta, if you are ready," he bowed to her. She turned and bobbed her head to the assembled Peleaguls, then followed him to the shuttle. He gestured her inside with Spock and McCoy then turned to face the Peleaguls.

"Dr. Starkes will be our representative until an ambassador arrives from the Federation," he bowed to them.

Farewell, Kirrik their minds whispered through his.

"May you live in peace," Kirk said. He looked one last time at Kea, Eek and little Kaa then turned and entered the shuttle. The Peleaguls watched the ship take off.

"Kirrik!" little Kaa cried loudly.



"Without freedom of choice
there is no creativity.
Without creativity there
is no life."

- *The Return of
the Archons*

SEVEN INTREPID TRAVELLERS

Seven intrepid travellers came
From the Future to the Past.
To save something wonderful
Something that would not last.

by: Vonne Shepard

It seems we are destroying
Natures beautiful gifts.
With toxic chemicals and hunters
There is an ever-lengthening list.

It will take those from the Future
To show us the error of our ways.
They are here to save their future
And they only have one day.

Splitting up into three teams,
Each with a specific task.
They all have to hurry
Soon the present will be the past.

Chekov and Uhura to find power
To fuel their return trip.
Nuclear fuel will have to do
Obtained from a nuclear ship.

Scotty and Bones to build a whale cage
Out of plastic from the past.
Sulu will fly it to the ship by chopper,
And together they'll make it last.

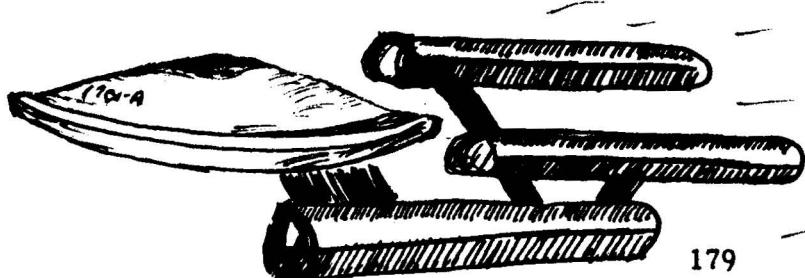
Kirk and Spock together
Have to find the whales.
A very difficult problem
One that is hard to assail.

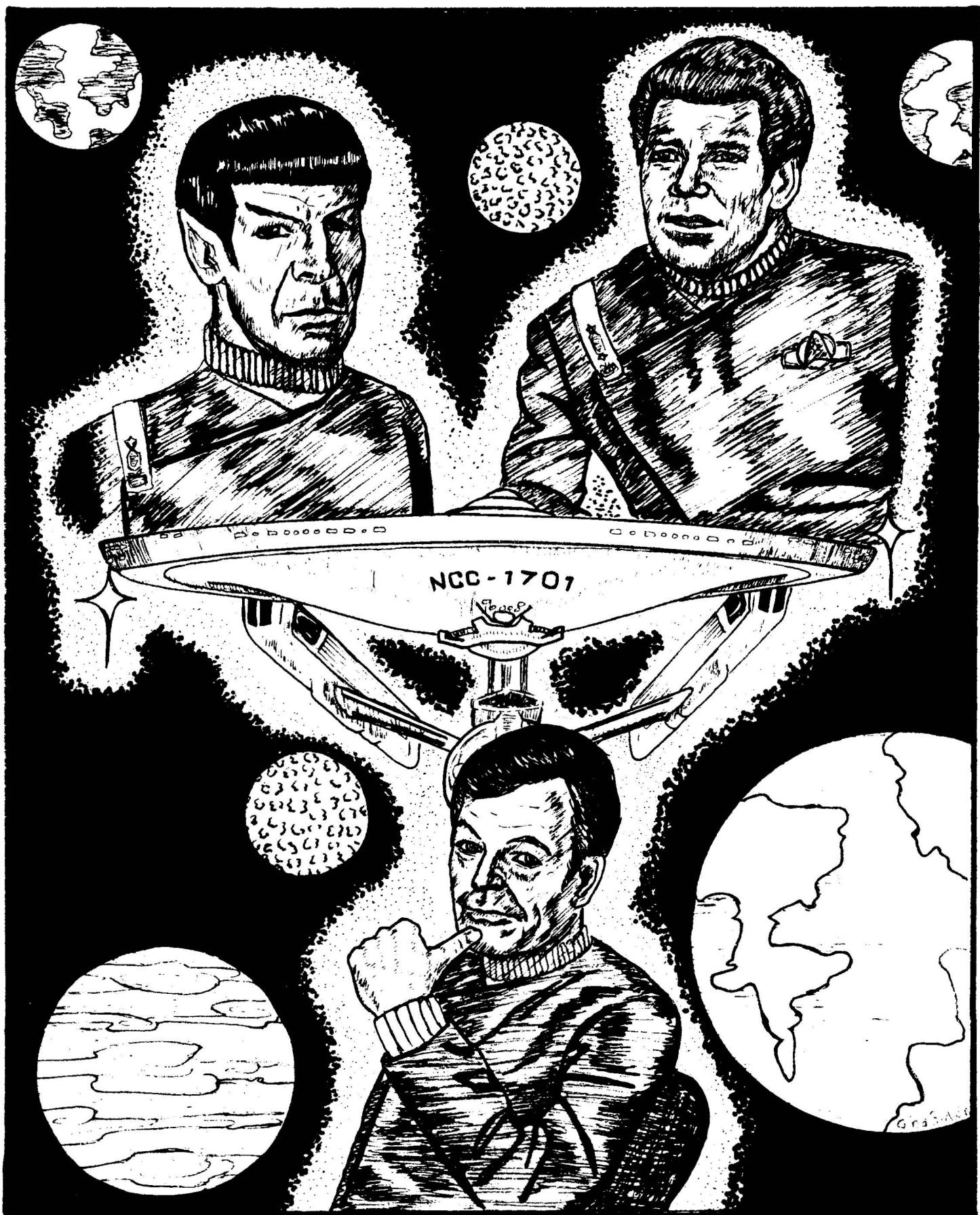
Problems they will encounter,
Dangers, fears, and pain.
This time McCoy will operate
In order to save Chekov's brain.

Heading back to the Future
Whales and Biologist in tow.
Now they must survive time travel
To make their adventure a go.

Punished for their misdoings
Though not as severe as they thought.
Wondering in the shuttle
What would be their lot?

A ship on the horizon
Difficult to disguise
Beautiful NCC-1701-A
Beautiful Enterprise.





Friends Forever

by: Vonne Shepard

art: Gina Godwin

Traveling to distant planets,
Through the cold silence of Space.
Leaving the security of Earth,
To go beyond the stars.

The Leader, Scientist, and Healer,
Three men, diverse in nature.
Forming a friendship,
That withstands the limits of time.

Arguments, anger, and laughter,
Fear, love, and hope,
Emotions, non-emotions,
Friendship and Brotherhood.

One will leave the Triad,
The remaining will grieve their loss.
It's hard to be logical,
When the logical one is gone.

His return was unusual,
Brought about by the other two.
Who gave up everything,
For their friend and brother.

The Triad will go on,
For their future is well known.
They will always be together,
And together, anything is possible.

SHARED LIGHT

by: Ellen Morris

art: Cami Forsell

Leonard McCoy lay down on the slab in the waning heat of Vulcan evening. The sky burned with sunset, silhouetting the pylons towering above them. Strangely enough, he was not afraid; this was for Spock -- the danger of which T'Lar had warned. The other-presence inside him was quiet. It understood what was to come and its understanding helped to soothe McCoy's misgivings. The doctor felt like a child approaching a darkened cave, his fear of the unknown staunched by the comforting grasp of a grown-up's hand around his own.

McCoy closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. The other-presence rose up and wrapped itself around his concentration, focusing it gently with the experience of years of meditation. McCoy relaxed, falling into the rhythm of the subvocalized chant that the other-presence had begun around him. Far away he felt a hand settle upon his face.

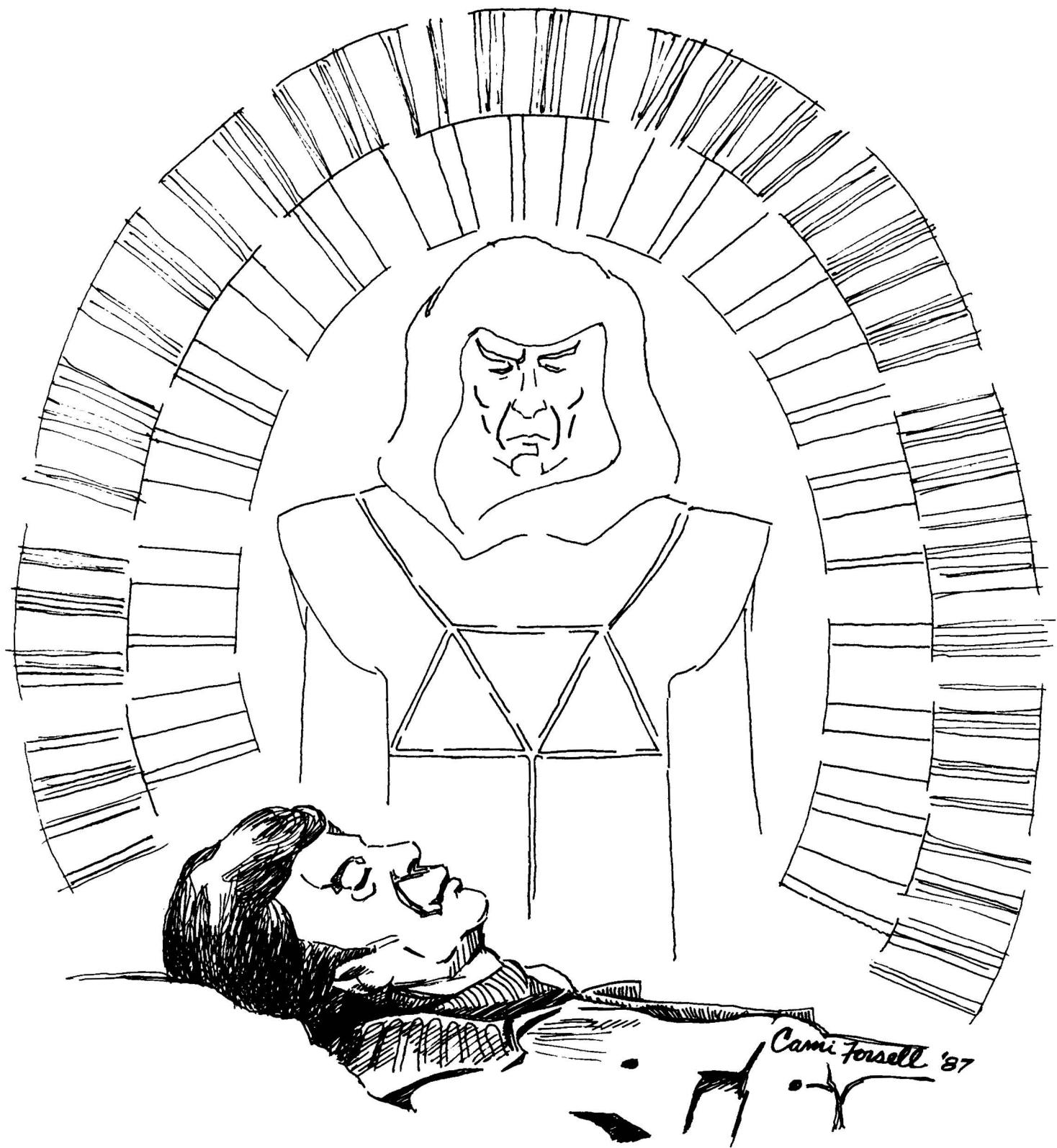
He began to rise in the warm darkness, he and the Other, a gentle ascent, away from weight and physical sensation. The velvet night was not without form: it was, McCoy sensed, a steep corridor, soft around them and safe passage to their destination, but the doctor could not remember where they were going.

McCoy was aware, as they rose, that the Other moved closer to him -- closer than they had ever been before. With its approach, it began to glow, softly at first. As the space between them dwindled, the Other began to shine, to blaze and to engulf him. It pervaded him and completed him, heady and white-shining. The light filled his deep, empty places. It sucked away the sorrow and the loneliness as though draining out poison -- cleansing him. And it was suddenly, startlingly familiar.

The light was logic... Bits of words floated through to him, echoed around him: those mathematically perfect brainwaves of yours ... you green-blooded, inhuman ... blasted Vulcan! His own words, from light years away, reflected back to him ... and he wished he could shrink away from the generous light.

But the light was more: curiosity, a hunger for learning... that green-blooded son of a bitch ... his revenge ... and the light grew brighter as he tried to draw back.

And yet the light was still more: unfailing compassion, uncompromising honesty, wry humor ... the light was love ... I've missed you. Not just McCoy's voice this time, but the voice of the Other as well.



Then the light exploded -- a thousand new-born suns. McCoy basked in the joy-flavored radiance, understanding at last the Other's gentle chiding, the paradox of love expressed through his own crustiness. At the edge of his awareness he could almost hear a low, throaty chuckle somewhere, all around him and yet not there at all. ... **Understand ... thank you ... owe you my very life ... love you too ...**

Beyond the brilliance, interrupting their closeness, McCoy sensed a purple shadow in the night. He could hear an unearthly music -- soft, ethereal, beckoning from the center of the darkness.

But not beckoning for him.

It called for the Other.

The light then began to diminish. It slowly began to move away, reaching for the song.

McCoy reached after it. **Take me with you.**

The Other hesitated. **Here is the bridge for which we have searched, but I must cross it alone.**

McCoy radiated rebellion. **You can't go alone!**

Reproach surrounded him, lightly tempered with affection. ... **not a landing party, Doctor.**

... I don't want to be alone, McCoy responded uncomfortably, not after knowing all this.

You will not be alone. Neither of us will after knowing all this. ... My friend.

The light then drained away and the silence began to stretch. He did not move. Beyond the violet haze there was a brilliant flash. McCoy then began a gentle descent cradled in a fuzzy warmth. Feeling terribly, terribly empty. And very much alone.

His eyelids were heavy. The white darkness was pink-stained. As he opened his eyes he found the Vulcan sky flushed with dawn. He moved slowly to rise, though he was not stiff or sore. He merely needed to be very careful. His limbs felt new and he was unaccustomed to their manipulation. He got down from the slab cautiously and stood uncertainly. The ground was solid. He took a step. Yes, his legs would support him.

McCoy turned his gaze to the other pallet. It was surrounded by robed figures. He could not see past the busy crowd. They would know soon enough if Spock had made it back safely.

He stepped down from the stage and met his friend's concern with the words, "I'm all right, Jim." He walked past the admiral to his shipmates. He heard their questions

of concern as well, responding with nods and simple, single-worded reassurances. There was only one person he really wanted to see. He was actually aware of little else until Spock approached them all.

McCoy watched as the Vulcan surveyed each one of them. When Spock paused before him, McCoy looked into those young/old eyes. **Nothing.** No response. And then the Vulcan moved on.

The feeling was gone. Had it been a dream? It must have been. Somewhere between sunset and sunrise he had dreamed Spock closer and more human than he had ever known him before. He had loved him the way he loved Jim, one more indispensable soul in a life sadly lacking significant others. But that was all -- just a night spectre.

What had Spock said?

"Jim. Your name is Jim."

And McCoy was paying close attention.

"Yes." Jim's lips spread into that innocent smile.

And then Spock turned to face McCoy.

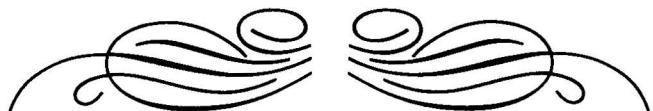
It happened so quickly that it seemed barely to happen at all. Suddenly it was there. The bridge. Beyond it, sleeping, was the Other. Over them both, inside McCoy, filling and embracing him was the light they had shared. The promise kept.

Remember? McCoy thought. He was unsure Spock would hear the thought, and so tapped his temple lightly. He could not help smiling, knowing that they would not -- either of them -- ever be alone.



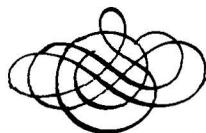
"The more complex the mind, the greater the need for the simplicity of play."

- SHORE LEAVE



A Cry of

by: Debbie Cummins
art: Fiona Graves



Loneliness

The distress call was so faint that Lieutenant Uhura nearly missed it on the first scan. However, years of expertise had sharpened her senses and the slight fluctuation in frequency caught her attention.

"Captain?" Uhura paused, narrowing her eyes in attention as she attempted to decipher the transmission. "I am picking up a signal, Sir." She hesitated, attempting to isolate the pattern. After a moment, she looked up at the Captain. "I am unable to translate it, Captain."

Kirk swiveled around in his command chair. "Switch the signal to Mr. Spock's station for decode."

As Uhura rapidly responded, Spock put the computer tie-in to his ear as the alien signal passed through Uhura's board and entered his own. He listened in silence for a moment. Then, shaking his head at Kirk, he pressed several more buttons on the console before him in rapid succession. The computer attempted once again to decipher the message. Spock's mind zeroed in on the bizarre pattern just as the computer flagged it.

"A moment, Captain." Spock listened as the chaotic clicks and hums of the signal organized themselves into a recognizable pattern. When the words became clear, he then switched the signal over to audio.

The high-pitched sound of a voice, unrecognizable as either male or female, filled the bridge. The tone was nearly hysterical, the speech rapid. The universal translator decoded the words as a frantic plea for assistance against an enemy that threatened to destroy all life on the planet, a violent force of unexplained nature that was sweeping all life away before it. The voice pleaded for someone -- anyone -- to come to their aid. There were no details, no description of the disaster which had befallen them. Simply the high-pitched wail, crying through space, calling for help from anywhere.

Spock removed the tie-in from his ear. "That is all there is, Sir. The same message repeats over and over."

Kirk looked up at him. "Can you determine the source of that beam?"

Spock nodded and turned to face his board. Uhura continued to monitor the transmission. Everyone else on the bridge had turned to watch the Vulcan as he worked. "The beam originates on planet four of the Ophiuchus star group. The planet is located 17.243 parsecs away on bearing 47 mark 23."

Kirk nodded and turned to the navigation station. "Mr. Chekov, plot us a course for planet four of that system." He swung his chair around to face Uhura. "Lieutenant, send a message to Starfleet Command. Relay the nature of the distress call. Inform them that the **Enterprise** will investigate the source of the message in order to render any assistance possible."

"Aye, Sir."

Kirk stood up and walked over to the science station. "Spock?" His voice was low. "Is there any way that you can tell when that message was sent?"

The Vulcan shook his head. "Negative, Sir. The beam may be hours old or, if it has a reliable source of power, it could have been transmitting for thousands of years."

Kirk nodded. "In that case, we may be far too late to render any assistance."

"There is no way to tell."

"No." Kirk looked down at Spock and gave him a wry smile. "We'll check it out, just in case."

It watched the forms from a distance. Somewhere within the recesses of its sensations, the entity could feel a strange familiarity with the figures that moved slowly through the shattered ruins of its destroyed world. There was a channel of communication that it could sense, a kindred feeling that fell within the bottomless pit of its loneliness. In the creature's mindless longing for companionship, it called together the fragmented parts of its being and moved off to follow them.

They walked away from the entity in two distinct groups. The larger one spread out in an evenly spaced line and moved slowly forward. The second group was comprised of only two beings. They walked behind the first group for a few moments, then stopped and stood together, speaking softly to one another. The gentle breeze carried the sounds of their conversation back to the entity, but the words had no meaning. Then the taller of the two turned back. The creature pressed itself against the soft earth, but the alien did not see him. His probing eyes stared into the ground where the creature lay, but he saw nothing and, after a moment, he turned back to his companion.

Kirk and Spock stood shoulder to shoulder as they surveyed the lush landscape around them. A variety of vibrantly colored wildflowers bloomed in the meadow. The mild breeze blew gently through the tree branches over their heads. Under other circumstances, they would have been entranced by the beauty of this world. On this mission, however, their attention was not focused on the loveliness of their surroundings; but rather on the readings that registered on the tricorder in Spock's hands. After scanning the horizon, Kirk turned back to Spock, who was standing at his side, quietly studying the tricorder.

"I read no evidence of sentient life, Captain. There is a wide variety of lifeforms of a lower order, but nothing registering that possesses more than a rudimentary intelligence. However," he turned and pointed the tricorder in another direction, "the reports from the ship's scanners is confirmed by my tricorder. The area around us was once the center of a large city, a technological level approximately the Earth equivalent of the year 2015. The artificial surfaces are now located 21.423 feet below the surface."

Kirk looked around him. It was difficult to believe that buildings towering into the air once stood on this bucolic landscape.

Spock bent down and ran his fingers across the tops of the grass. "That distress beam is emanating from this spot, Captain. It is located at a depth of 34.678 feet directly below us."

"It was apparently sent out from the lower levels of the building." Kirk bent down in an imitation of Spock's crouch. "How long would it take natural erosion to bury this city to a depth of twenty one feet?"

"Without making a detailed examination of specific geological forces or ascertaining annual rainfall and alluvial dispersal patterns..."

"Spock."

"I would say approximately fifty thousand years, Captain."

Kirk grabbed a handful of soil and let it run through his fingers. "Fifty thousand years. No wonder no one is left alive."

"Ship's computers have locked into some scientific data files that have remained intact. It should be possible to decode them with reasonable facility. Perhaps they will provide us with some answers as to what happened here."

Kirk stood up, rubbing his hands together as he brushed off the lingering dust. "There was no biological cause for what happened. Ship's scanners would have detected any disease organisms in the atmosphere or on the surface." He looked over at Spock. "I have it on good authority that any biological or viral organisms sufficiently deadly to wipe out an entire planet could still remain in evidence on the planet even after a period of fifty thousand years."

"Such organisms have a dormant lifespan far in excess of that figure, Captain. If that had been the cause of what happened here, we should have detected it."

Kirk's face was troubled. "The voice on that message was frantic. Whatever happened here must have occurred very rapidly."

Spock nodded. "The rate at which the natural sedimentary deposits were laid down is constant throughout the urban areas which have been located through ship's scanners. Due to the fact that there is no disturbance in the natural cycle, it is unlikely that anyone survived the initial disaster."

He looked down to recalibrate the tricorder, then shook his head. "If anyone survived, even for a relatively short period of time, the occupied buildings would have shown a variation in the depositional layer. The **Enterprise** scanners would have detected a fluctuation even as small as two millimeters. It is possible that, if there were any survivors, they could have fled the city to seek refuge in the countryside from whatever had befallen them. However," he looked around the area for a moment, as if visualizing the scene as it was five hundred centuries ago, "it would seem unlikely that the inhabitants of this planet would have successfully adapted to a transition to such a primitive lifestyle. The culture was heavily urbanized throughout the populated areas and the people were highly advanced technologically. Such a rapid transferral to a simple lifestyle would have been an extremely difficult adjustment to make even under the best of conditions."

"So if there were any initial survivors, they probably didn't live very long afterwards."

"That would seem a reasonable assumption."

Kirk nodded, and, pulling out his communicator, signalled the ship.

"Scott here."

"Mr. Scott, do ship's scanners report anything new?"

"No, Sir. The readings have confirmed what we learned on our first pass."

Kirk looked toward the red-shirted figures in the distance for a moment. "Mr. Scott, prepare to beam us up. The security detail is spread out in a circle seventy meters in front of us."

"Aye, Sir. I've got a fix on them."

"Energize on my signal, Scotty." He lowered the communicator and looked over at Spock. "It would appear that we are far too late to help anyone here, Spock."

The Vulcan regarded him sadly. "Yes. Captain. It would appear so."

Kirk raised the communicator again and signalled the transporter room. He could see the beam as it formed around the security men ahead of him and felt the strangely disquieting sensation of dispersion and weightlessness as the energy field took him away.

Behind him, Kirk did not see the alteration in the transporter beam as it spread out to accommodate the added energy source that had rapidly moved forward to be near him. The transporter, sending its signal down to lock onto the electrical and biological impulses at the coordinates fed to it, read the added energy with the mindlessness of the machine that it was. Unthinkingly, it locked onto the combined impulses and took them all aboard the **Enterprise**.

James Kirk and his First Officer walked down the corridor from the transporter room in silence. The memory of the destroyed planet beneath them filled their thoughts. The visible remains had long ago fallen to neglect and the abuse of the elements, but the realization of the agony and suffering which must have permeated the planet in its death throes would not so easily disappear.

Spock slowed his pace and turned to face the Captain. "Sir, with your permission, I will go to the science laboratory and begin to decipher the records we were able to salvage from the planet."

Kirk nodded. "I'll be on the bridge. Let me know what you find out."

"Yes, Sir." Spock turned and moved silently away. The enormity of the pain which still seemed to emanate somehow from the planet below settled over him like a shroud and, for a moment, Kirk was tempted to follow him and attempt to offer some consolation. But his hesitation stifled the impulse, and, after watching Spock move away for a moment, he turned and made his way reluctantly to the bridge.

The linguistic labs had never been known as the hub of activity on the **Enterprise**; although, in truth, the department always had much work to do. The language diversity within known space provided a staggering amount of data and the transcribing and correlation of the multitude of symbols easily filled the working days of the ten person staff.

The labs were normally quiet during the night shift. On this particular night, Doctor Janet Freeman, one of the **Enterprise**'s linguistic experts, chose to work extra hours. She entered the lab silently and nodded greetings to the two others on staff who manned the labs during the graveyard shift. Placing her books and papers on the desk before her, she sat wearily and leaned her arms on its polished surface. One of her companions looked over at her with an expression of compassion.

She raised her eyes to meet his gaze and managed a faint smile. "Don't even ask."

Lieutenant Hodge smiled sadly and returned to his work.

Freeman busied herself with her papers for a moment before the door to the labs opened and a young man in a red security uniform came in. She looked up and her face

flushed scarlet when she saw him. He walked to stand before her desk, covering the distance between them in three long strides. "I wasn't finished talking to you." Though his voice was low, everyone in the labs could sense the fury in his tone.

Freeman rose to her feet. "I told you, Andrew, we don't have any more to say to each other."

Lieutenant Haberle leaned forward. "You can't cut me off like this."

She leaned forward to match his pose. "We don't get along anymore. Every day it just gets worse." Her voice was no louder than a whisper; but, in the total silence pervading the room, she knew everyone in the labs could hear. The humiliation devastated her.

The object of her embarrassment stood erect. "No. I want to talk to you now." His voice seemed to echo off the walls.

Freeman reached out to take hold of his arm. Circling around to the front of the desk, she motioned him to the door. "Come on. If we're going to fight, at least we can have the courtesy to do it in private." She steered him toward the door. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Hodge rise to his feet in concern. She shook her head. "I'll be back in a moment."

The sensations of the Lieutenant's anger seeped through the bulkheads and the entity reacted to it as if it were a narcotic. It drew the mindless being's attention like a beacon, leading the entity irresistibly to the source of the hostility. The creature followed the trail like a lost child who finally recognizes a familiar landmark leading it home.

It had prowled the long corridors searching blindly without purpose for the past several hours. It needed anger, fear, sorrow as the humanoids on the vessel needed food and drink. But the people who passed it unknowingly in the corridors were placid and controlled. The entity was unable to single them out without an emotional landmark to guide it.

And then the fury penetrated the walls and reached into its mind with the intensity of a laser beam. It turned its unseen face toward the signal. In a perverse and twisted way, the entity sought out the anger as it would a friend. The anger was a reminder of the before time, the time when everything was not so empty, when there was still a tenuous link with the creators. The entity sought the fury as a comfort and, when it sensed the first concrete manifestation of a similar rage, it searched for the source with a single-minded purpose.

The strange human ability to shout in whispers kept the sound of their argument from leaking beyond the briefing room walls. Freeman stood facing her former lover.

"Who do you think you are, barging into my work area, behaving in such an uncivilized manner before my co-workers? You dare to embarrass me professionally like that!"

Haberle's initial rage was tempered by the truth of her remark and he raised a hand in apology. She knocked his arm away, her own rage equalling his anger of earlier. "I don't want to discuss it now." She turned her back to him. "I have to go back to work. Leave me alone. I'll need some time to try and get myself settled down first."

"Janet, please."

"Go away!"

His anger totally deflated now, Haberle turned and dejectedly left the briefing room.

The door closed behind him and Doctor Freeman stood with her back to it for a moment. She half-expected him to return and when the door opened again, she wasn't surprised. Clenching her teeth, she turned around. The door closed on an empty room. Freeman looked around in confusion and took a step forward. Suddenly the air before her erupted into a burst of brilliantly glowing lights. They sparkled and danced, revealing a vague, enormous outline. A section of the form detached itself and swung out toward her. The massive blow caught her squarely in the chest and sent her hurdling through the air. She hit the far wall with a sickening crash and fell heavily to the floor. An enormous weight seemed to cover her, crushing her against the floor. She could feel a pressure behind her eyes as if her skull was about to explode. The lights enveloped her body as an irresistible force tore into her mind. The force pulled out such naked, nameless fear that she could almost see her sanity dissipate away. For a moment, she was able to push the terror back, but the force reasserted itself and bore into her mind like a laser. She struggled underneath it but, as her terror mounted, it seemed to grow stronger. The lights had now become so bright that they blinded her. The grotesque and horrifying images being dredged up from her subconscious mind forced a silent scream from her throat. Paralyzed with fear, she gave up the struggle as visions of hell burst on her mind. Freeman found herself helplessly trapped in dreams she had had as a child when she was being pursued by a faceless monster, and found her feet mired in molasses. The images went deeper and ceased to have reality connected with them -- the fears an animal would have of a broken leg, a cub in a den about to be consumed by a forest fire -- mindless, instinctive terror.

Her mind was shredded by these images. Bred to be a rational creature, she could not live with these primeval fears suddenly flooding her mind all at once. She retreated into madness the instant the creature feeding on her had satisfied its hunger on the last electrical impulse her tortured brain was able to supply.

James T. Kirk stood in front of his command chair, quietly watching the viewer as Ophiuchus Four silently rotated beneath them. Even from twenty thousand miles, the planet was beautiful -- the verdant greens of the continents contrasting with the brilliant aquamarine of the seas.

However, the Captain of the *Enterprise* did not see the planet's loveliness. There was a red alarm going off inside his head and, when he looked at the beautiful world beneath him, the signal nearly deafened him.

Sulu turned to face him. "Captain, we are ready to warp out of orbit on your signal, Sir."

Kirk broke his concentration and looked down at him. For a moment, he did not reply. He turned his attention back to the planet again. Sulu waited patiently. "We'll stay in orbit for a while, Mr. Sulu." His gaze remained on the planet while he spoke.

Sulu showed no reaction. He turned back to face his station and recalibrated his panel.

Kirk turned to Uhura. "Lieutenant, send a message to Starfleet Command. Tell them I have decided to stay in orbit until we learn more about what occurred on the planet."

"Aye, Sir."

He had turned back to face the viewscreen again, showing the planet rotating peacefully below them, when Spock's voice called to him from the intercom. He pulled the switch down. "Yes, Mr. Spock? Have you found something?"

"Yes Captain. You may find this interesting."

"Are you still in the labs?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I'm on my way."

The entity nuzzled Freeman's arm. A soft whimper escaped its mind, causing sparks to leap into the air. The hand was lifted, then dropped to the floor with a dull thud. Spreading its essence across the length of the floor, the entity flowed away from the body. Pausing at the door, it hesitated, then slid back to envelop her again. It probed her mind, but there was no life, no thought. The loneliness that came with this knowledge rose up to fill its entire being with black despair.

For a few precious moments, sustenance had been there. The entity had been filled with the kindred feelings of rage, fear and sorrow that made up so much of its own nature. The terrible sense of loneliness had disappeared. But all too soon the companion had fled, slipped away beyond a door beyond which, the entity could not envision.

Sorrow consumed it, but this sorrow did not bring comfort. Coming from within the creature itself, it served only as a reminder of its isolation. The doctor's dying nightmares would sate its hunger for a time; but, within its primeval thoughts, the entity knew that it would be driven to kill again.

And in a part of its mind, the knowledge made it cry.

The door to the science labs slid open and Kirk walked in to see Spock already on his feet facing him. The personnel working behind him rapidly scrambled to attention. Kirk raised an arm in dismissal as he approached Spock. "What have you got?"

The Vulcan turned to the terminal before him. "According to these records," he pulled a switch and the computer enhanced image appeared on the screen, "the city officials did not know the cause of what was happening. Please observe."

Spock leaned forward as pages of reports flashed across the screen. His eyes darted back and forth in time with them. After a moment, Kirk gave up attempting to read along with him and straightened up. "Mr. Spock?"

Spock turned to face him. Kirk had a faint smile on his face. In anyone else, such behavior would have appeared to have been intellectual arrogance. In Spock, he simply found it amusing. "Would you mind interpreting for me?" Kirk was delighted to see a faint blush spread across the Vulcan's cheeks.

Spock stood erect. "Yes, Captain, of course." He paused for a moment and Kirk knew that, if they had been alone, Spock would have favored him with a smile.

"This report was compiled by a man who called himself T'rai Zsin. He identified himself as a leader of a branch of the scientific community organized under government sponsorship. He was responsible for setting up the distress signal. It would appear that he was one of the last survivors in the city." Spock's amused expression had vanished as he related the man's final hours.

"He reports that a series of bizarre murders began occurring in a suburb of the city. The planet's culture was not a particularly peaceful one. Consequently, little attention was paid to the incidents at the time of their occurrence. However, with the passage of time, the murders had grown in number and frequency. Due to their bizarre nature, T'rai Zsin took an interest in the deaths and recorded an extensive report on them. He gives a fairly detailed description of the condition of the victims."

He stopped speaking, hoping Kirk would not request details. The Captain watched him in silence. With an inaudible sigh, Spock continued to report. "There was evidence of violent physical assaults. Many of the victims had broken ribs and internal injuries. However, the wounds were never the cause of death. In fact," he looked up at Kirk, a frustrated expression on his face, "the doctors were unable to determine an exact cause of death. The murders continued for a period of three weeks. Then, twenty-two days after the first death was reported, something occurred which dramatically accelerated the murders. People began fleeing into the city in a state of panic from the area where the deaths had occurred, relating tales of a murdering force that was killing everyone in its path. Whatever this force was, it moved toward the city very rapidly, driving the people before it. Chaos rapidly broke down all lines of communications and policing became impossible. T'rai Zsin retreated to the building where we found the beacon and recorded this message.

Spock paused. "There is a recording of his murder, Sir."

Kirk held his breath. "Have you already listened to it?"

The Vulcan nodded, his eyes closed. "There are sounds of a struggle. T'rai was clearly injured. Then there was a short period of silence..." Spock's face was pale. "He began crying out, calling out, repeating names over and over — names of people that he must have known. He seemed to be in a state of abject terror, as if the attack fostered unbearable fears and nightmares into his conscious thoughts. His speech became virtually incoherent. His cries were shattering. They seemed to go on endlessly."

Spock turned away and Kirk lay a compassionate hand on his arm. "In reality, the attack lasted four minutes and six seconds. There were no other entries after his death. Only the distress signal."

"It sounds like some form of attack directed against the mind as well as the body."

"Yes, Captain." Spock answered quickly, relieved that the conversation had taken a more objective direction. "The psychological attack was apparently the cause of his death. His voice, although incoherent, was nevertheless strong, right up until the moment of his death. Had he had been seriously injured that would have been physically unlikely."

"Whatever killed him somehow triggered the release of his own fear. And that fear is what caused his death."

"There were sounds T'rai made during the attack that seemed more like cries of sorrow than fear. At one point, Captain, he wept."

Kirk looked at him. "Basic emotional responses; fear, sorrow. A creature that could elicit such responses? How?"

"Unknown, Captain. I have been attempting to locate other official archives on the surface in the hopes that they will provide more information, but so far I have been unsuccessful. Due to the fact that all records are now buried under the accumulated sediment of fifty thousand years, such records will be extremely difficult to find. If it were not for the distress signal to guide us, we would not have found this record."

Kirk nodded. He was bending down to study the viewer again when the intercom buzzed. He flipped the switch.

"Captain. Lieutenant Peterson here, Sir. We've just found Doctor Freeman of Linguistics in Briefing Room Four. She appears to have been murdered, Sir."

Kirk jerked his head up and looked into Spock's wide eyes. "On my way."

The scene in the briefing room was one of quiet efficiency. McCoy leaned over the body as Spock and the Captain conferred with the security men in hushed tones.

The Doctor looked up, motioning for his assistants to bring the gurney up alongside him. Sliding his arms up under the bruised ribcage, McCoy lifted the body with great care as if the lifeless form were still capable of feeling pain. The head rolled back limply and a doctor flanking his left reached out to cradle it with an open hand.

Kirk moved to stand behind McCoy, as the doctor laid the body gently on the gurney and watched as it was pushed from the room.

"What killed her, Bones?"

McCoy turned to face him. "My readings show three broken ribs and a ruptured kidney, but those injuries were not the cause of death. I'll run more sophisticated tests in sickbay, but there is evidence of severe emotional distortion, almost a psychosis."

"Could that cause her death?"

"In view of the lack of sufficient physical injury, I would say yes. I'll be able to tell you more after I run those tests."

Kirk nodded. "Go ahead, Bones. I'll need your findings as soon as possible."

"Yes, Sir." McCoy turned and, flanked by two members of his medical staff, rapidly left the briefing room.

Spock came over to stand beside Kirk. The Captain turned to look at him. "Opinion."

"There would appear to be a marked similarity with this death and that of T'rai Zsin." His expression was grave.

"Then whatever killed him, or something similar, could be on board the Enterprise."

Spock nodded. "Yes, Captain. That would seem a reasonable assumption."

Kirk stared at the Vulcan for a long moment as his mind spun in a thousand directions at once. "Get on the scanners. Try to isolate any alien readings."

Spock turned without a word and walked to the monitor. Pulling up the shipwide scanners, he ran them throughout the body of the ship. Kirk watched, his hands clenched tensely behind his back. After a moment, Spock straightened and faced the Captain. "I get no unusual readings."

Damn. Kirk pushed the useless reaction from his mind. He had not really expected Spock to find anything. Whatever was on his ship had apparently beamed aboard with them. It was unlikely that the alien would have willingly stayed marooned

on the dead world below if it had possessed the ability to leave. But as soon as an avenue of escape had presented itself, it had fled.

Spock's thoughts were following a similar path. "Captain, this creature evidently transported aboard with us earlier. Since no one observed it and Mr. Scott's transporter did not register any added weight, it would seem that we are not dealing with a biological lifeform, but more likely one composed of some type of energy."

"It's invisible." Kirk's voice was low. "That's why no one reported seeing anything."

"Captain..." Spock's jaw tightened. "Captain, I calibrated ship's scanners for the entire electromagnetic spectrum. Even if the intruder does not show up in visible light, it must register on some wavelengths. The scanners ran from gamma to radiowaves and revealed nothing."

Kirk turned to look around the room. There was very little evidence of a struggle -- nothing broken, no overturned chairs. Only a small blood stain on the rug and the rips Freeman had dug into the carpet with her fingernails.

"The entity had enough strength to nearly crush her ribcage. She never had a chance to even call for help." He looked back at Spock to see the Vulcan's eyes fixed on the torn carpet. "It doesn't seem intelligent, but it evidently attacks the mind. It must be a huge and powerful creature to be capable of killing the entire life on the planet below, but no one saw it come aboard. It roamed the ship for four hours before killing one of my crew." He slapped a fist into an open hand. "What in the hell is it?"

"Something totally unknown. Our scanners pick up only what they are programmed to pick up."

"Yes, yes." Kirk began pacing back and forth. He seemed preoccupied, but Spock noted that he avoided walking on the spot where Freeman had died. Kirk's shoulder brushed against the far wall as he turned back to Spock. "How do we know it's even the same creature that destroyed life on that planet 50,000 years ago? There could be a whole race of them down there. If our scanners can't pick it up on the Enterprise, they won't down there either."

"I think that unlikely, Jim. T'rai said there was only one. The sounds I heard when he was being killed indicated only one attacker. All evidence points to one being."

"It's not composed of matter, it doesn't register as an energy source. Universal laws, Spock. The spectrum is the same throughout the known galaxy. If it's an energy source, it has to show up on the spectrum. But it doesn't." The pacing began again. "Hell, Spock. It must be composed of something!"

"I will recalibrate and run further tests. However, it appears that this... intruder is totally alien. It will be difficult to isolate without further knowledge of its nature."

Kirk stopped his restless pacing and turned to face the Vulcan. "What are the odds that the creature will attack again?"

"Very high, Sir."

Kirk nodded and walked to the intercom to signal Uhura. "Lieutenant, issue a yellow alert and put me on a shipwide channel. He heard her switch him over, noting the strangely hollow sounds the intercom made before he spoke. He took a deep breath. "This is the Captain. A member of the Linguistics Labs, Dr. Janet Freeman, has been found murdered in Briefing Room Four. It is our belief that this incident is somehow connected with the mass deaths on Ophiuchus Four and that we have taken an intruder aboard from the planet.

"The Lieutenant was killed by a combination of a physical and a psychological attack. The only details that I can give you at the moment regarding the intruder is that it is apparently a field of energy invisible to the naked eye. It is capable of exerting great physical stress on the body of its victim. In addition, it is apparently able to somehow disrupt the mental processes, causing severe emotional disturbances. This creature does not register as a biological lifeform. Phaser fire, therefore, will not be effective against it. However, we must assume that the creature will attack again. Until we have more data on the organism, all crewmembers will work and travel in pairs. Kirk out."

Spock turned toward the door. "With your permission, Captain, I will go to the science labs and attempt to isolate any alien readings on board."

Kirk nodded and Spock began to walk out of the room. The Captain moved quickly to match steps with him. "I'll walk down with you."

Spock gave him a rueful look. "Then I shall simply have to escort you to the bridge."

Kirk smiled sadly. Then they turned together and left the briefing room.

The science labs were full of activity -- with many **Enterprise** personnel quietly working, trying to isolate the source of the danger. Spock entered the labs one step behind the Captain. He seemed lost in thought and, as Kirk turned back to face him, he reached out and touched the Captain's arm.

"A thought has occurred to me, Captain." He walked ahead of Kirk to stand before a monitor. Then, rapidly calling up a geographical schematic of the southernmost district of the city, Spock quickly plotted the sites of the deaths T'rai had recorded. "This is the area where the initial killings were centered before the final holocaust. I will plot their locations dependent on the date at which the killing took place."

The First Officer pressed several buttons in rapid succession as he correlated T'rai's account with the diagram in front of him. After a moment, he sat down, studying the mass of figures on the monitor before him. "Do you see the pattern, Captain?"

Kirk leaned over his shoulder. "Yes, Mr. Spock." The sites of the murders radiated out from a building at the center of the diagram like the spokes of a wheel.

The earliest deaths were nearly adjacent to the dwelling, later ones farther away. Each time death struck, the location was at an increasing distance from the mysterious complex sprawled at the center, as if a deadly forager had ventured out from within its confines to feed on the habitations encircling it.

Kirk looked over at Spock. "According to this schematic, that house is on a hill and partially exposed. I think it would be a good idea if you were to beam down and check it out."

"I shall get my equipment and be in the transporter room in five minutes."

"The security guard will be waiting." Kirk looked over at him. "Be careful, Spock. We don't know if there are any more of those creatures down there."

"May I say the same to you, Sir." He gave the Captain a worried look before turning and, flanked by three science lab personnel, left the room.

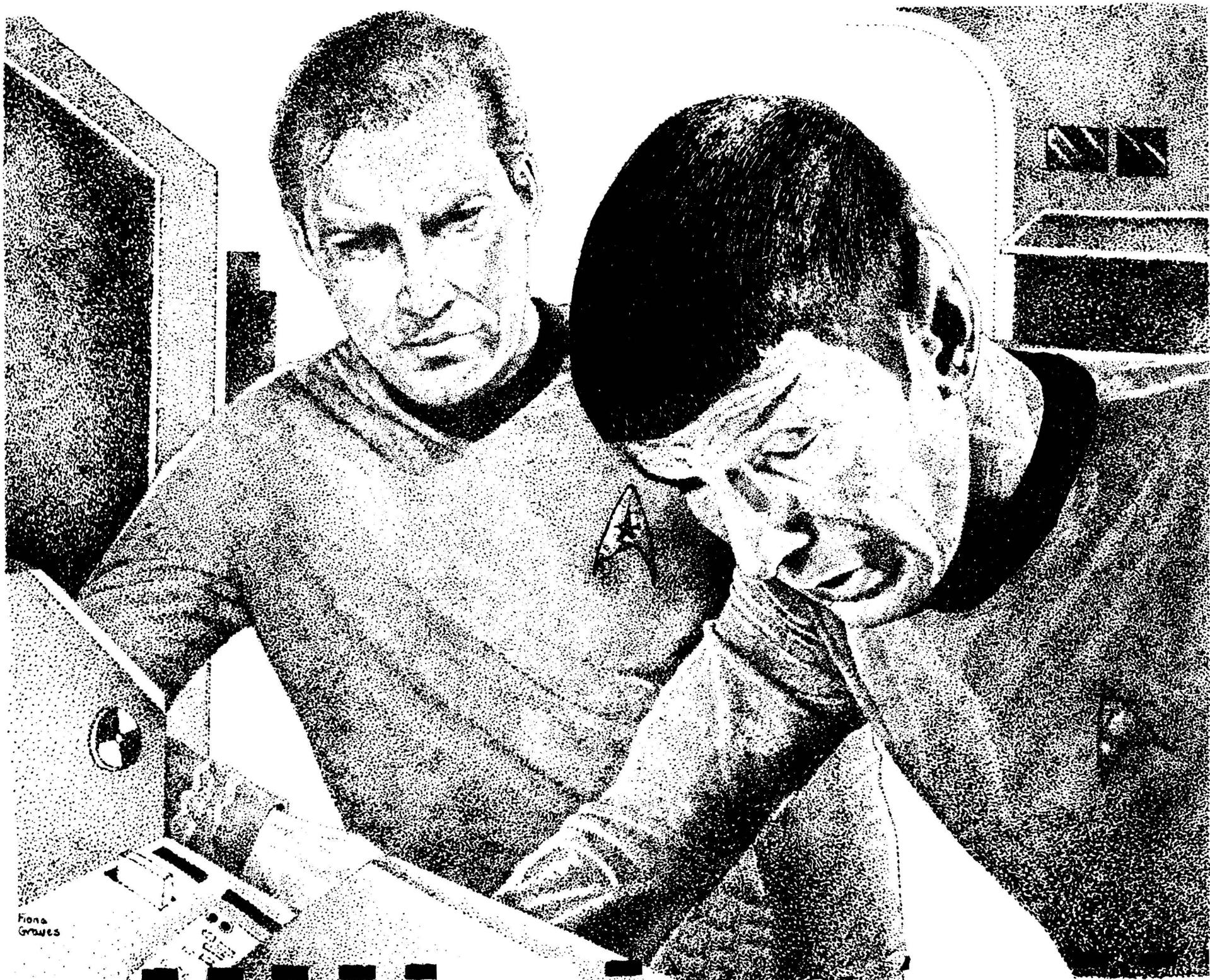
The scientists who had brought such disaster to their world were meticulous notekeepers, a trait they unknowingly shared with scientists throughout the galaxy. It took Spock only moments to locate their files and record them with his tricorder. An hour later, he was standing in the briefing room with the other senior officers of the Enterprise.

Without a word, Spock programmed his report into the monitor so that all could see. His grave expression was soon matched by those present as the import of what had occurred within those crumbling walls so long ago became clear to them.

"Gentlemen," Spock did not look away from the monitor as he spoke. "As you can see from this report, twenty scientists lived in this house. Their areas of expertise varied from nuclear engineering to psychoanalysis. However, they all had one thing in common: the desire to artificially accelerate the evolution of the species. They all sought to create within themselves a more highly evolved form of life. After several years of experimentation, they created a mechanism that was capable of altering the electrical impulses of their brain patterns. Using themselves as subjects, the scientists programmed the machine to excise the more primitive aspects of their natures -- aspects they considered undesirable." He pointed to a series of entries. "This indicates that their experiment was considered successful at first. They record a dramatic drop in the incidents of professional jealousy and a significant decrease in the amount of friction between them when they worked together. The only negative indications recorded is an increase in the number of disturbing dreams."

"Fourteen days after their experiment began, the first death is recorded. It occurred at a house very close to their own; but, aside from fearing that the investigation would hinder their work, they make no note of it at all. However, with the increase in the number of murders, there is a growing concern that their work may have something to do with them."

Kirk leaned forward and indicated a particular entry. "That was the day they first recognized what they had created."



Fiona
Groves

Spock nodded. "Yes, Captain. They had somehow managed to fuse all of the negative, more primeval aspects of their psychological makeup into a single force. As we had suspected earlier, it is not a biological being, but rather a series of electrical impulses."

McCoy raised an eyebrow. "Such a creature is a physical impossibility."

Spock's eyes remained focused on the Captain. "What these scientists were doing is a totally unexplored area. There is no way to adequately calculate what is possible and what is not."

"No wonder the scanners didn't pick it up." Kirk looked up from the monitor. "This one entity destroyed all life on the planet?"

Spock nodded. "It is probable, Sir. Such an emotional force would be unencumbered by the limitations of a physical body and would be capable of drawing virtually unlimited strength from the depths of its instincts. Unleashed on an unsuspecting populace, such a creature could wreak havoc on that order of magnitude." Spock looked down at the monitor. "There is a pattern discernible here, Captain. The first incident, the report that the scientists made of their disturbing dreams, would indicate that they were either suffering from aftereffects of their experiment or..." His eyes grew distant.

Kirk leaned forward. "Or what?"

Spock broke his concentration and looked up at him. "Or the entity was attempting to get back into their minds and, in so doing, triggered the dreams. They left extensive records of them. The dreams dealt solely with fears of drowning, starvation, things of that nature. Nightmares that they had not experienced in many years surfaced -- primitive, nocturnal dreams."

"Yes." Kirk nodded. "That would fit."

McCoy tapped a finger on the table. The sudden noise reminded his two companions that they were not alone. "If what you're saying is true, Spock, this creature was driven to kill other inhabitants of the area, but left these people alone until the final day. Why?"

"Perhaps it recognized them. Perhaps it was unaware that it was killing the others. It may not have been murdering intentionally. You have to understand, Dr. McCoy, that this creature would have been incapable of rational thought."

"Then it wouldn't have been able to recognize those scientists."

Spock gave him a discerning look. "Doctor, even an infant has some recognition of those who gave it birth. Such a process does not require rational thought."

McCoy was clearly unsatisfied with the Vulcan's answer. "But it did kill them all eventually, and then went on to destroy everything else on Ophiuchus."

"Yes." Spock looked back at the monitor. He called up a particular entry. "Day twenty-two. The day that they first faced their creation. Observe." He indicated the report before him. "Their records are extensive on that point. They searched

frantically for a way to destroy it. Apparently, the entity did not seek to harm them until they rejected it. And this rejection triggered the rampage leading to the devastation of the entire planet."

"And it destroyed all life within the space of a few hours." McCoy's voice was soft. He spoke the words more to himself than to anyone else.

"Doctor, it is only the limitations of the body that control the power of the mind. Freed from those limitations, a creature composed of such energy would have unlimited reserves of strength from which to draw."

Kirk straightened up and Spock turned back to him. "Is there a description of this thing?"

"Yes. They described it as an energy field with fluctuating dimensions and contours. It is, as we surmised, invisible to the naked eye. However, when it is aroused, it gives off electrical impulses that would be visible as a series of sparks or a field of charged particles."

"And it becomes aroused when it seeks out its own kind." Kirk read the monitor as the information continued to fill it. "It seeks fulfillment. It sustains itself on the same kind of violent, terrifying emotions that it is composed of."

Spock stood silently for a moment, staring at the viewscreen. "Captain, it is not so much that it feeds on these emotions. It is more like it seeks comfort in the company of its own kind. Due to the human's psychological make-up, these emotions are too deeply buried for the entity to derive comfort from them directly. It must pull them to the surface of consciousness in order to partake of them. In so doing, it brings them into conscious awareness and it is this which kills."

He looked into the Captain's eyes. "The creature may only be acting according to its nature. It may not be seeking to kill."

Kirk's cold gaze did not alter. "Is there any way that we can protect ourselves from such an assault?" The question was directed at McCoy, but the Captain's gaze stayed on Spock.

The Doctor rose to his feet, pointedly ignoring the visual sparring between the two men. "If what you say is correct, Spock, then we can't protect ourselves from this creature. The subconscious mind is active even in a non-waking state. There would be no way to shield the mind from direct attack. Even sedation would be ineffective."

"So, aside from physically removing the crew, our only option at the moment is to stay alert and wait for the next attack?" Kirk flashed an angry look at Spock. "Recommendations, Science Officer?"

Spock met his gaze evenly. "It may be possible to communicate with it. The creature may not be killing intentionally. Perhaps it is unaware of its effect on humanoid lifeforms."

"Do you think you can get through to it, Spock?"

"Possible. I would like to try, Sir, if the situation presents itself."

Kirk looked into Spock's eyes for a moment. Then he shook his head. "It's too dangerous. This creature is almost certainly the same one that destroyed the entire sentient life on Ophiuchus Four. It hardly seems a likely candidate for rational communication.

"Jim." Spock's voice was soft. "According to T'rai's reports, the creature killed a great many people in a very short time. If it transported up with us, as seems likely, it remained on board for four hours and twenty-five minutes before it was driven to kill here. If it were acting under the same influences of fifty thousand years ago, it would have destroyed everyone on board within minutes of its arrival."

"It has killed one of my crew, Spock. I hardly find the fact that it hasn't murdered us all a source of consolation." His voice was cold and unyielding. Spock looked away and Kirk immediately regretted his words. "We can't do anything unless we find it. Let's work on that angle first." He put a hand on the Vulcan's arm. "No unauthorized attempts at communication, Mr. Spock, understood?"

Spock raised his eyes to meet Kirk's. "Understood, Captain."

"Good. I'll be on the bridge." He moved to go, feeling Spock's eyes stare into his back. He was determined not to look back; but, as the door slid open, he turned his head to look into Spock's worried eyes. Rapidly, he walked back to him and spoke in a low voice. "I have to be able to move around, Spock, without a bodyguard on my elbow. You know that as well as I do."

The Vulcan did not look convinced. Kirk frowned. He reached into the desk at Spock's right and pulled out a communicator. "I'll carry this with me at all times. Will that satisfy you?"

Reluctantly, Spock nodded his head.

"Good. I'll be on the bridge." He turned, and, slapping the communicator to his belt, left the room.

The creature cowered against the far wall of the storage compartment. Something had penetrated the fog of mindlessness in which it had lived for so long. When the entity reached out to the woman in the briefing room, a single rational thought had filtered into its own mind.

The touch of sanity brought back bits and pieces of memories of the before time, the time when it was not so alone. But it was so long ago that the fragments made no sense.

The shivering form wrapped itself into a tight ball, withdrawing from the painful memories that brought no relief. The tiny shred of reason flickered for a moment, as if it was fighting its own battle to stay alight. Then it was gone.

A full thirty-four hours passed before the next attack. Kirk had spent the entire time pacing the bridge or prowling the corridors, searching for suspicious signs, his mind alert for anything at all out of the ordinary.

Spock had returned to the bridge after eight fruitless hours in the science labs. As with everyone else on board ship, with the exception of the Captain, he had allowed two science technicians to escort him up before sending them back to the labs to continue their research. Having channelled all the computer records to his library-computer console, he sat at his station hour after hour painstakingly checking every available possibility.

Kirk repeatedly left the bridge, shouting "You have the con," over his shoulder as he left, ignoring the Vulcan's worried eyes that watched in silence as the doors quietly closed behind him. Spock always checked to be certain that the Captain had his communicator, but the sight of it strapped to his hip did little to ease the Vulcan's apprehension.

Then, just as Kirk returned to the bridge after another unproductive circuit of the ship, the intercom buzzed.

It happened in the gym this time. Three crewmembers were attacked in the presence of several others. One was dead, two seriously wounded, but alive. Kirk heard the report in full, then rose to his feet and walked quickly to the turbolift in silence. He flashed a quick look toward Spock and the Vulcan rose without a word and moved to join him.

They arrived at the gym in time to see McCoy race in with a number of sickbay personnel in tow. He shouted instructions and moved off to kneel beside one of the injured crewmen. Kirk and Spock moved beside him. Kirk knelt at the young man's side. "Lieutenant Gould, can you describe what you saw?"

Gould reached a hand up blindly, the marks of sheer terror etched into his face. "Captain!"

Kirk caught his hand. "Yes, Lieutenant. Tell me what you saw." His words seemed to calm Gould's agitation.

McCoy moved at his shoulder and he looked up to see the Doctor pull a hypo from his medical kit. The Captain's look stopped McCoy in motion. "Not now, Doctor."

"Captain, this is not the time."

"I said not now, Doctor." Kirk's lips barely moved when he said the words. He then turned his attention back to the man before him. "Lieutenant, tell me what you saw."

Gould's eyes seemed to refocus as he gazed at Kirk. "Captain, I heard Ensign Harris scream. I tried to help him but something pushed me back. He was lying on the floor screaming. Carlson and I -- we both tried to help him." At the mention of the other name, his eyes widened. "Carlson, is she all right?"

Kirk reached out to stroke his face. "Yes, she's being taken care of. She'll be all right. Now, tell me what you saw. What did it look like?"

"I couldn't see it, Sir, not really. It was just a kind of glow around the outside, like St. Elmo's fire it was. You remember the pictures of the sailing vessels of Old Earth when St. Elmo's fire would dance around the square-rigged masts?"

His emotional control was wearing thin and Kirk eased up on him. "Yes, Lieutenant." He nodded to McCoy and the Doctor rapidly injected the hypo he had held for the past few minutes into Gould's arm, pausing just long enough to give Kirk a bitter glare. The Captain ignored him. He pressed his hand against Gould's arm. "You rest now, Lieutenant. We'll take care of everything." He stood up and backed away as McCoy motioned the gurney forward and helped lift the semiconscious man onto it. Then, rapidly directing his personnel out, the Doctor followed them from the gym without a word.

Spock moved to stand beside Kirk. His gaze was on the dead body lying on the floor. "Captain. This creature could easily have killed everyone in the gymnasium if that was its intention."

Kirk stared at him. "Are you defending it, Mr. Spock, because it killed only one instead of killing nine?"

An expression of shock and dismay filled the Vulcan's eyes. "No, Captain. I only mean to suggest that there may be reason to hope that we can communicate with..."

"I intend to destroy this thing before it kills any more of my people. I do not regard the killing of only one as an act of compassion."

Spock looked away. "I did not mean to imply that, Sir."

"Find me a way to kill it, damn it, Spock. That's your job." His voice was as cold as ice.

Spock pulled back as if struck, but said nothing. Kirk turned away from him and watched in silence as Harris' body was taken from the room.

"Captain?" Spock's voice was low. "If you will excuse me, I shall return to the bridge."

Kirk did not respond immediately and Spock took the silence as a dismissal. He turned to leave when he felt a familiar touch on his arm.

"Spock, I'm sorry. I'm frustrated." Kirk shook his head. "I always seem to take out my frustrations on you. You're the last person in the world I would ever want to hurt."

Spock's gaze softened. "I know, Jim. I too am frustrated."

Kirk tightened his grip on Spock's arm. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

James Kirk had not slept in sixty-three hours. He stood beside Spock at the science station while the Vulcan conducted another futile scan of the ship's interior. His face was pale, his expression drawn. Leaning forward, for an instant he seemed to lose his balance, but caught himself before anyone other than Spock noticed.

"Jim?" Spock's voice was so low that the Captain could barely hear it. "Jim, you must rest."

Kirk ignored the suggestion. "There has to be a way of destroying this thing, Spock." He slapped his hands together in frustration. "What am I talking about destroying it for when we can't even locate it." He paused for a minute in thought. "You said it had a composition similar to electrical impulses. Why can't we short it out?"

Spock had a defeated look in his eyes. "It would register on ship's scanners if it were composed of true electrical current. It does not. It is..." he struggled to find a suitable analogy, "a powerful emotional force, a living emotion, if you will."

"And how do you propose that we kill it -- through exposure to another emotion? It draws out hate and anger from our subconscious minds. What do you suggest we do, throw loving thoughts at it? His frustration and exhaustion put a sting into his words.

Spock lowered his eyes. "The creature is impervious to our weapons. It does not show up on scanners. I regret that I can think of no course of action at this time."

Kirk put a hand on the Vulcan's arm. "I'm sorry, Spock." He rubbed his eyes. "I know you're doing everything you can. Maybe you're right. Maybe I should get some sleep. I can't even think straight anymore."

Spock looked up at him, but his mind suddenly seemed far away. Kirk watched him for a moment before withdrawing his hand. At the absent touch, Spock's attention returned to him. "Captain, your comment on the use of emotion to combat the creature had not occurred to me, but the idea holds merit." Without taking his gaze off Kirk's face, he flipped the intercom switch and paged sickbay.

"McCoy here."

"Spock here, Doctor. Would you run a psychological profile on the victims of the attacks and compare the area of the brain affected and the severity of the attacks?"

"Of course, Spock. Do you have some reason to believe there may be some significant variations?"

"I do not know, Doctor. I would prefer not to go into details until I see the results of your comparisons."

"Very well, Spock. I'll have the results for you in five minutes."

"Thank you, Doctor. I shall be right down." He flipped off the switch and turned back to face Kirk.

"Are you on to something, Spock?"

"I do not know, Sir." He continued to eye the Captain.

Kirk returned his gaze evenly for a moment, then nodded his head with a look of resignation. "All right. I'll go lie down. But I want you to take a rest soon, too. I never did buy that nonsense about Vulcans never needing sleep. I'll lie down for an hour, then you take a rest, agreed?"

Spock nodded. It was far more of a concession than he had expected. "I shall escort you to your quarters on my way to sickbay."

The creature pressed against the corner. The hunger was beginning again, but it was tempered now with another emotion. Something had happened during the last attack. A shred of rationality had penetrated the mindless flood of emotion and stayed. The light did not die out but even now continued to flicker defiantly. The flame cast a faint illumination, but the road to understanding was still blocked.

Perhaps it was the fact that this time the victim was not alone. A sense of empathy touched the entity's mind as the other Humans in the room moved forward to aid their fallen companion.

The entity forced them back, but a tiny fragment of reason remained behind. The brief contact left its mark and, in blind terror, the entity had fled.

It found refuge in the suite of rooms nearby. The quarters seemed to beckon it forward and it slid through the doorway and compressed itself against the farthest corner.

The sounds of voices in the corridor outside disturbed the silence. There were two distinct voices at first. Then two others moved in to join them. Footsteps echoed off the silent walls as three of the forms moved away. The other remained outside the doorway, standing silently for a moment. His presence sent a shock of fear through the invisible form and it took a shuddering movement backwards, nearly knocking the carved Aztec statue to the floor.

The Enterprise's hallways were quiet. Ship's personnel moved along the corridors in groups of twos and threes. Security guards stood, also in groups of two, at regular intervals, but nothing had occurred in several hours. There was an air of expectancy, a tension among the crew present. However, the years of experience had taught these

people to act under pressure as a routine of the job and, therefore, the atmosphere on board had a surprising look of normality to it.

The Captain and First Officer walked down the hall, nodding absently to the personnel they passed. When they reached Kirk's quarters, they stopped. "Captain, perhaps I should go in with you."

The open worry on Spock's face caused Kirk to reach out to him. "I'll be fine, Spock. I have my communicator," he lifted the device off his belt and hefted it in his hand, "and there are security guards fifty feet down the hall." He patted Spock on the arm. "I managed to live thirty-three years of my life without you as my guardian angel. I'll be fine. Spock's grave expression did not change. "I'll expect you to wake me in one hour, Mr. Spock." He attempted to alter the Vulcan's expression by a display of authority. It didn't work, but he persisted. "No longer, understood?"

Spock nodded.

Two crewmembers approached them from the opposite end of the hallway. Kirk motioned them over. "Would you escort Mr. Spock to sickbay?"

"Yes, Sir. Of course." The words came from both of them at once.

For an instant, Spock did not move. Kirk gave him a weak smile. "Go ahead, Spock. Get down to sickbay. McCoy's waiting."

With visible reluctance, Spock turned and walked slowly down the hall flanked by his two bodyguards. When he reached the end, he glanced back toward Kirk, who was standing outside his quarters, returning his gaze. They nodded to one another, then Spock quickened his pace and walked out of sight.

Kirk stood a moment longer, then turned and entered his room. Suddenly feeling exhausted, he walked quickly over to the bed and sat down. Rolling his shoulders in an attempt to loosen his tense back muscles, he closed his eyes for a moment as he tried to relax.

If his eyes had been open, he may have had a chance to ward off the attack. As it was, the creature struck him with a crushing blow to the chest, knocking him back against the bed and driving the air from his lungs. He reached out to push it back but there was nothing to grab onto. Fumbling for his communicator, he had it in his hand when the creature knocked it away. Kirk struggled to regain his balance, knowing that he had no chance while lying on his back, and succeeded in partially pushing the beast away from him. However, he could feel it reach into his mind, pulling his fear over himself — fear over the ship out of him and drawing strength from it. He could almost see as the force grew stronger, the lights dancing off its exterior glow with more brilliance. He felt himself losing the battle and called out for Spock, the sound dying on his lips as the entity wrapped itself around the frantic call and consumed it.

Spock had just reached sickbay and, thanking his escorts, sent them on their way. The door slid open to admit him and McCoy looked up from his work and nodded his head

in acknowledgment. Spock was about to return the gesture when the gripping, fiery pain seemed to shoot through every nerve of his body at once. He staggered and reached an arm out blindly for support.

McCoy covered the distance between them in an instant and grabbed the Vulcan's hand. Spock's clouded expression cleared when he recognized the Doctor, but there was such open terror in his eyes that McCoy let the Vulcan's fingers slip through his own.

"The Captain." Spock's voice was barely above a whisper. Pushing himself to McCoy's desk, he slammed down the intercom switch. "Security to the Captain's quarters. Emergency!" Then he turned and fled sickbay at a run.

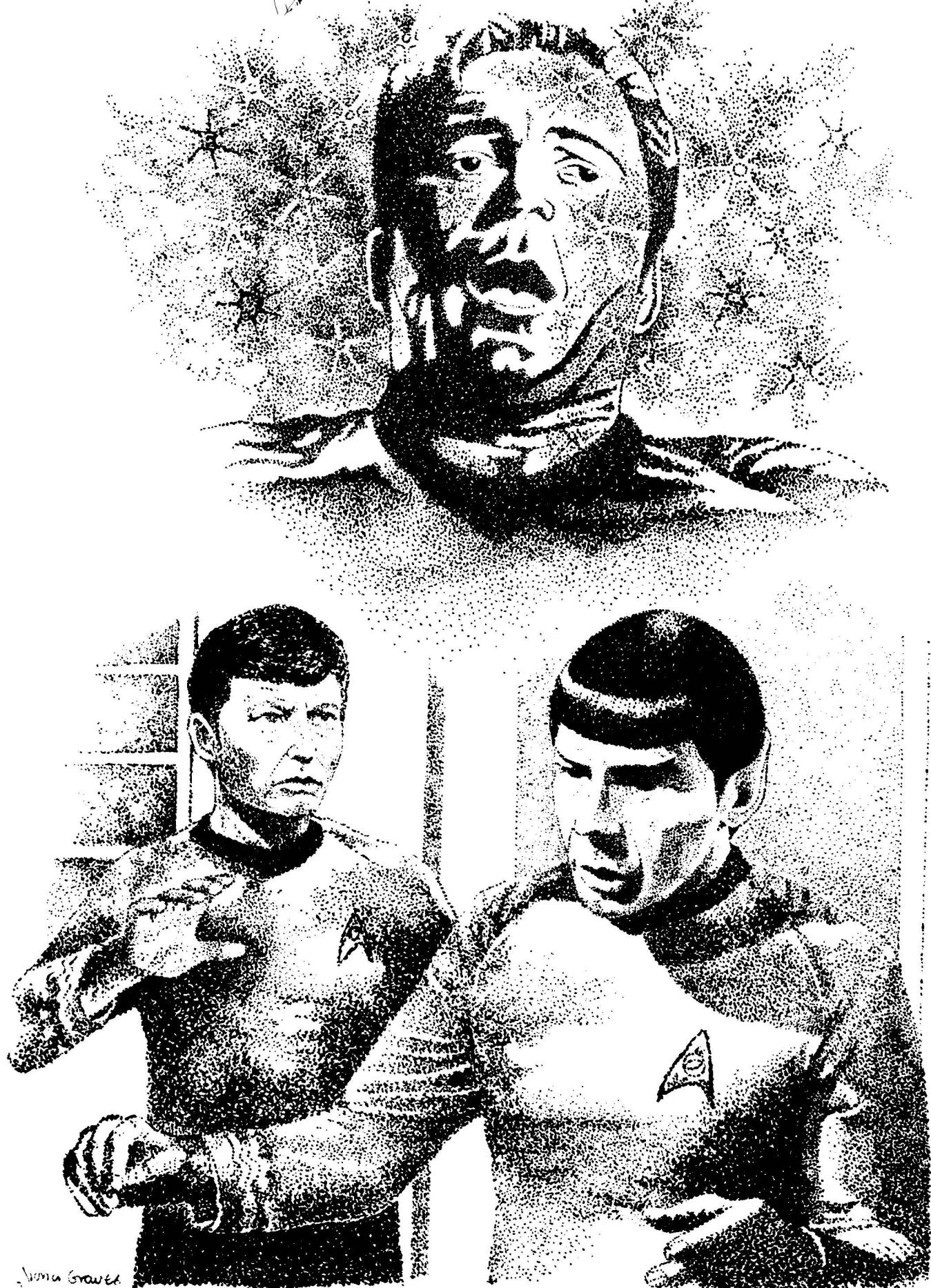
McCoy yelled instructions to the startled medical personnel behind him and followed Spock outside. By the time he had cleared the sickbay doors, the Vulcan was out of sight.

The creature pressed itself upon him, driving the air from his lungs. He could feel his ribs bend under the pressure. His body cried out for oxygen and he could feel himself grow lightheaded as his consciousness began to fade away. The air moved around his face and he found himself wondering how something that he could not see could still have breath that he could feel against his cheek.

Kirk knew in part of his mind that the attack was only seconds old, but it seemed to be endless. He struggled ineffectually against the crushing weight that held him down as the sensations of steel bands boring into his mind continued to slice his brain into sections. They were like grappling hooks that locked around his thoughts and fears, ripping them out of the deep recesses of his mind and exposing them to the light of reality.

Spock! He screamed the word out from the bottom of his consciousness. He could sense that Spock was coming to him, but he knew a deep despair at the knowledge that the Vulcan would be too late. For, ironically, it was his terrified cry for Spock that unlocked his deadly weakness. The entity latched onto the name as a leach would latch onto a jugular vein. It drew the fear and love from him in enormous mouthfulls. The many times he had allowed Spock to risk his life for the ship, sending him out with the stoical facade of a full-blooded Vulcan while deep inside, buried so far down that even he was not fully aware of it until now, there was such a bone-numbing fear that it totally paralyzed him.

The entity drew strength from the fear and dug in for more. Deneva, a beautiful planet whose memory only filled him with sadness. Sam had died there and the sorrow he had felt had, until now, neatly obscured the deeper guilt over Spock's injury. He knew now, as the entity pulled the memory out of him, that he felt a terrible guilt because he had suffered more over Spock's danger than over the death of his brother -- his own flesh and blood. The many camping trips, long talks into the night, thirty years of memories and shared experiences. Could all of that have been overwhelmed by the few short years since he had known Spock? He had barely even thought of Sam until the Vulcan was healed and the guilt suddenly seemed to crush him.



Jona Gravet

The entity fed on the memory of Sam's death for what seemed like forever, forcing tears from Kirk as it made him confront the reality of his feelings. Then it tore down deeper, to his fears of losing command, losing control, losing his ship. Spock. He had even been ready to sacrifice Spock to save his ship and the knowledge suddenly filled him with despair for it seemed such a selfish thing. He loved his ship as he would love a woman. But it was not a woman. It was not alive. It was a thing.

No! He struggled to fight the entity above him. It is not just a thing! It is my life, my oath!

But the creature ceased to care. It tunneled into the core of his fear. It had learned from the first attack that fear was stronger than anger and it hungered for the emotion. There was a fear of loneliness here that it recognized and the entity tore into it in a feeding frenzy.

Kirk felt himself losing the fight as his mind was twisted inside out. The blind terror filled him now and he no longer thought about Spock. He no longer thought about anything.

Spock raced down the hall at a full run. He almost collided with the security guards who arrived at the Captain's quarters at the same instant. The door opened and he ran in ahead of them, nearly knocking them off their feet in his haste.

Kirk lay on his bed. His arms were flung out at his side, his fingers hanging limply over the edges of the bed. The shapeless, iridescent outline of a form lay over him. One section of the entity turned to face Spock and, in his mind, the Vulcan could hear it growl.

Pushing himself against the glowing white mass, Spock was reaching out for Kirk when a savage blow sent him backwards into the arms of one of the security guards. With one motion, he pulled away from them and flung himself across Kirk's body. He realized instantly that the only way to save the Captain was to force the entity from his mind through the strength of his own thoughts. Pressing his fingers to Kirk's temples, he entered the nightmare world where the Captain's mind was trapped.

Hovering over the bed, the entity wound itself around Spock's rib cage, pushing the air from him as it pummelled itself against the iron wall surrounding his consciousness. He ignored it, reaching out a beacon of clarity into the darkness of Kirk's mind. He felt the touch of response and reached deeper.

Shouts echoed behind him but he paid them no attention. He knew that this was all happening within a fraction of a second, but a sense of time, like all logical thoughts, had no reality in a world of madness and time now seemed to stand still. The entity pounded along the length of his spine, crying out in mindless rage over losing its prize. Spock ignored the pain and continued to pull.

Security guards filled the room, holding McCoy and his medical personnel outside. Their phasers were drawn, but they hesitated, lacking a clearly visible target, fearful of hitting the two men on the bed. The entity, sensing that it had lost the

battle, panicked when it turned to face the number of people opposing it. Impervious to phaser fire, possessing far more power than the combined strength of those who stood against it, the entity shrieked in silent despair and pushed the guards aside as it fled the room in mindless fear.

The vile sensations that the creature left behind slowly dissipated from the room. Spock continued to pull until Kirk's rational consciousness filled his mind. The Captain opened his eyes and looked up. There was recognition in his expression. Seeing it, Spock slowly broke the meld.

Straightening up, he steadied himself against the side of the bed as the room began to spin. The enormous strength it had taken to pull Kirk back had totally depleted him, and, holding himself upright on his arms by force of will alone, he waited until Kirk spoke his name. Then he collapsed, throwing his body to one side so that, even in unconsciousness, he would not injure the Captain by his own falling weight.

The familiar lights of sickbay formed over his head and Spock looked up into the faces of McCoy and the Captain. He raised his head off the pillow. "Jim, are you all right?"

Kirk's face was pale and he held on to the sides of Spock's bed with both hands. "Yes, I'm a little dizzy, that's all."

Spock saw him shudder at the memory of what had occurred and he reached a hand out to touch Kirk's fingers.

The Captain covered the Vulcan's fingers with his own. "Thank you for my sanity, Mr. Spock." He straightened up and turned to face McCoy. "I need him released from sickbay."

McCoy frowned but the statement was not unexpected. He nodded with reluctance. "In view of the circumstances, I'll authorize it, Jim." He paused for a moment, then turned to Spock. "I nearly forgot why you had come to sickbay, Mr. Spock. Before you go, do you want to see that report you asked me for earlier?"

Spock raised his head eagerly. "Yes, Doctor."

As he struggled to sit up, McCoy reached a hand out to push him back. "I'll put it on the monitor here, Spock. You must lie still." He pulled up the computer report and bent over to read it with Spock. He pointed a finger at one set of numbers. Then he turned to look into Spock's eyes.

The Vulcan nodded his head. "There is a pattern."

McCoy nodded. "I see it too, Spock."

Kirk moved forward. "What is it? What do you see?"

Spock and McCoy turned to him in unison. Spock deferred to McCoy as the Doctor answered the Captain's question. "The attacks have focussed on different areas of the brain. The first attack on Dr. Freeman was the most violent, centered on the core of the subconscious. The second was of a milder nature. Otherwise, all of those attacked in the gym would have been killed."

"In plain non-medical terms, Doctor, what are you trying to say?"

Spock reached out to touch his hand. "The entity would seem to be attempting to minimize the strength of its assault. That is probably the reason that you were not killed also."

Kirk looked down at him. "You mean it's trying not to kill, trying to get what it wants from us without murder?"

Spock nodded. "That is a possibility."

Kirk slapped his hands together. "Possibilities! That's all we come up with, possibilities and speculation. I need more than that, Spock."

"We must attempt to communicate with it, Captain."

Kirk frowned. "We can't accomplish anything here. Let's get back to the bridge." He turned cold eyes on McCoy as if defying him to question his action.

The Doctor reached a hand out, laying it on Kirk's arm. "You're both in a precarious condition. Keep that in mind, will you?"

Kirk gave him an incredulous look and reaching an arm out, helped Spock to his feet.

McCoy watched as the two balanced one another. Damn, he thought to himself. They should both be flat on their backs. However, with the body count on board rising, he held his tongue and stood helplessly to one side as the two men walked unsteadily toward the door. He saw them sway slightly to one side, but, with their arms locked around one another, he was unable to tell just which one had lost his step.

Then, in one synchronous movement before the door opened, their arms untangled and fell to their sides, and, as the door slid back, they walked unaided out of sickbay.

The creature crawled into a corner of the storage area. Being invisible to the naked eye in a state of rest, it did not need to conceal itself, but it nevertheless felt driven to press its form against the wall. Lying there in a mock imitation of repose, the distorted emotional being put forth a sound that, were anyone on board capable of hearing it, would have sounded like a howling cry of despair.

Spock froze in mid-stride and he turned toward the source of the disturbance. Beside him, Kirk raised a hand, thinking at first that the Vulcan had felt a momentary weakness.

Spock brushed his hand away. "No, Captain." He listened for a moment. "Did you hear something?"

Kirk stood in silence. There were many sounds. The soft hum of the life support system as it circulated the air, the distant throb of the engines. Nothing but the sounds that he knew as well as he knew the workings of his own mind. He shook his head. "I don't hear anything."

Spock turned to move away from him. Kirk followed a half-step behind. He hit the intercom as he passed. "Security, this is the Captain. Mr. Spock and I are on deck five near sickbay. I want a fully armed team down here on the double." He switched off the intercom. Spock was already several feet ahead of him and he quickened his pace to catch up. "What is it, Spock?"

"I am not certain, Captain. I am picking up sensations," he stopped for a moment, "of extreme loneliness -- unbearable loneliness."

"Is it coming from the intruder?"

The Vulcan nodded, his eyes fixed on a spot at the far end of the corridor. He took another step forward, then reached back to push Kirk away. "It is coming. Go, quickly."

The security guard appeared at the end of the hall and ran as a unit to stand beside them. Kirk stretched his arm out to hold them back. In unison, they looked beyond him and he followed their gaze down the corridor.

Finally, after forty-five hours of searching, the captain of the *Enterprise* confronted his quarry on an equal footing. The entity stood at the end of the hall. Its contours fluctuated, like oil floating on water, spreading, withdrawing along all sides of its being. It glowed faintly -- a soft, white light that seemed to end in snapping electrical charges. There was no noise, however, no crackle of electricity. The silence was ominous and Kirk reached out to pull Spock back. The Vulcan, instead of moving away from the entity, took a step forward. His eyes were locked onto the center of the glowing mass. He raised his hands out before him in a familiar meld position.

Kirk grabbed his arm. His grip was tight and painful but the Vulcan did not seem to notice. "No, Spock!"

The Vulcan broke eye contact with the entity and turned to face him. "It is attempting to communicate, Captain. There is a rationality there now. I can sense it. I cannot reject it now, Jim. The results will be catastrophic."

Kirk loosened his grip but did not release Spock's arm.

"Captain. I can sense its loneliness, its longing for communication. I must allow it to touch me." He searched Kirk's eyes, pleading for permission.

The Captain stared at him for a long moment, then released his hold. "Go ahead."

Spock turned back to face the entity. He raised his arms out before him and slowly moved forward. The entity advanced toward him for a moment, then seemed to hesitate before pulling back.

"No!" Spock's voice was loud and, for a second, he projected anger, bait to lure the entity back to him. "Come to me. I will take you back." He spoke the words softly now, realizing that they were more for the Captain's benefit than for the lifeforce before him. The entity existed on a level far below vocal communication. The words meant nothing. It was the emotions that the entity sensed and Spock projected the feeling of comfort and peace into the space between them. The entity began to approach him. Behind him, he heard the Captain take a step forward.

He continued to hold his arms out, beckoning the entity forward. "I do not fear you. Come to me. Let me join with you and make you complete."

Suddenly, the lifeforce charged forward, hitting him squarely on the chest and sending him back against the bulkhead. It enveloped him within itself. Through the lights of its body, Spock could see the Captain approach, but he motioned him back. Then he lowered some of the defenses surrounding his mind and let the entity in.

Spock could feel the intense pain as it savagely entered his thoughts, but he was in a state of total peace and felt no fear. The entity pushed through the feelings on the surface of his mind with blind passion, but slowed as it sensed the presence of an intelligence which did not flee from it in terror. For the first time in its existence, it shared consciousness with one who was not afraid. Total acceptance. The effect was euphoric and the entity seemed to reach out to embrace him with a strangled cry.

But, with the acceptance came the awareness of the Vulcan's mind, the sense of its uniqueness and insularity that would forever deny entrance. As it shared Spock's consciousness for a moment, it reached a level of understanding and saw that it could no longer exist as it had existed before.

Spock opened his eyes, and, for an instant, he seemed to be looking into the entity's face. The true extent of its loneliness was almost more than he could bear. He nearly turned his face away, but the overwhelming need of the creature forestalled him.

As the fusion intensified, Spock sensed the terror that came with the entity's unnatural birth. Fragments of memories burst upon his mind, reminders of the horrors of its existence as it tried again and again to return back into the minds of the creators. But it always became lost in the dream and had finally fled in terror. Driven by need, the beast foraged throughout the countryside, searching elsewhere, anywhere for fulfillment. Oblivious to its effect on those it fed upon, the entity unknowingly left a trail of death behind it.

And then Spock saw the day when the creators had faced their offspring. The entity stretched out its essence toward them in a sense of mindless joy, but they had rejected it with the same primeval terror they had sought to excise from their own natures. The rejection brought forth anger in the beast, an anger that exploded into a white-hot fury and the entity devoured them, crushed the life from their minds with a savage, primal joy. Then, when the twenty lives were extinguished, when the last fragile hold on reality was gone, it had stormed across the surface of the planet. In a mindless bloodlust, the beast tore the weak minds of the people into shreds, destroying everything that was reminiscent of the creators. Then the killing finally stopped and silence descended over the empty cities. The entity, suddenly alone, wandered again and again across the land, searching through the tattered ruins, but the rampage had been thorough and there was nothing left alive.

In this way, the entity passed through the endless centuries, searching frantically, hopelessly for a single spark of intelligent life with whom to end its loneliness. The aching void from within drove it to scour the surface of the devastated planet a hundred times, a thousand times, but always the search ended the same way. There was no one else. The creature was alone.

The murderous fury that fueled the rampage of so many years ago was gone now, dissipated in the emptiness of the time that had intervened. All that was left was the hunger, the eternal hunger that seemed to devour it from within. Gathering some sense of reason from the mind fusion, the entity realized with a leaden certainty, that there would be no end to the hunger. It could never join with another and be complete. It was not one being, but fragments of several. Its own unnatural birth condemned it to eternal isolation.

Spock's eyes softened with compassion. "There is no other way for you. Do you understand?" Within his mind, he could hear the entity whimper in fear.

"I will help you make the transition. Do not be afraid." Holding his hands out before him, he lay his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

The minutes ticked by. Without taking his eyes off Spock, Kirk called to one of the security guards from over his shoulder. "Get McCoy." The guard moved soundlessly to the intercom and summoned the Doctor in a nearly inaudible voice.

Kirk continued to watch in silence as the glow from the creature grew steadily dimmer until it faded away completely. He waited another moment, but the presence was gone. Taking a tentative step forward, he called Spock's name.

The Vulcan's eyes opened and he looked up at Kirk. The Captain moved quickly to kneel at his side, and, when he saw Spock's expression, he motioned the guards away. McCoy rounded the corner at a run but Kirk waved him back.

He turned back to Spock and watched as the Vulcan struggled for control. Spock's jaw trembled and he clenched his teeth, but the action had little effect.

"Jim?" His dark eyes were filled with compassion and sorrow. He had thought that he understood through personal experience the meaning of isolation. Now he realized that he was wrong. "Such terrible loneliness. How did it survive for so long with such emptiness? It didn't mean to kill our people, Jim. It simply wanted to end its unbearable loneliness."

Spock turned away for a moment. "It didn't understand what it was doing, until now. When we joined together, it took my rational thoughts within itself and realized what it was, what it had done." He shook his head. "It wanted to be complete again. But with completion came understanding. It could not live as it was nor could it join with me permanently. My defenses were barely able to withstand its presence for the few moments we were together. It finally understood that at the end of the meld. There could be no joining, no peace, no end to the loneliness."

He closed his eyes again. "After so many years, the only answer that it found was in death."

Kirk put a compassionate hand on his shoulder. "It is dead?"

Spock nodded. "Yes, Jim. It is dead."

"I'm sorry, Spock."

The Vulcan regarded him sadly. "It was not an evil creature."

Kirk thought back to a time, long ago, when he had confronted a similar unnatural creature. As with this entity, that one, the one that had borne his own face, had horrified and repelled him at first, but it was not intentionally cruel or evil. It was a product of its nature. No more. No less.

McCoy hesitantly approached them from behind. "Captain, are you both all right?"

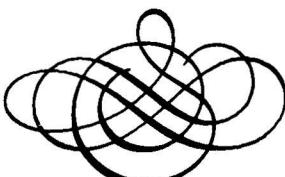
Kirk looked into Spock's eyes for a moment. Then he turned back to McCoy. "Yes, Doctor. We're all right now."

He laced an arm through Spock's and helped him to his feet. "Come on. Let's go get some rest."



"This is loneliness. What a bitter thing ...
it's so sad. How do you bear it, this
loneliness?"

- Metamorphosis





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